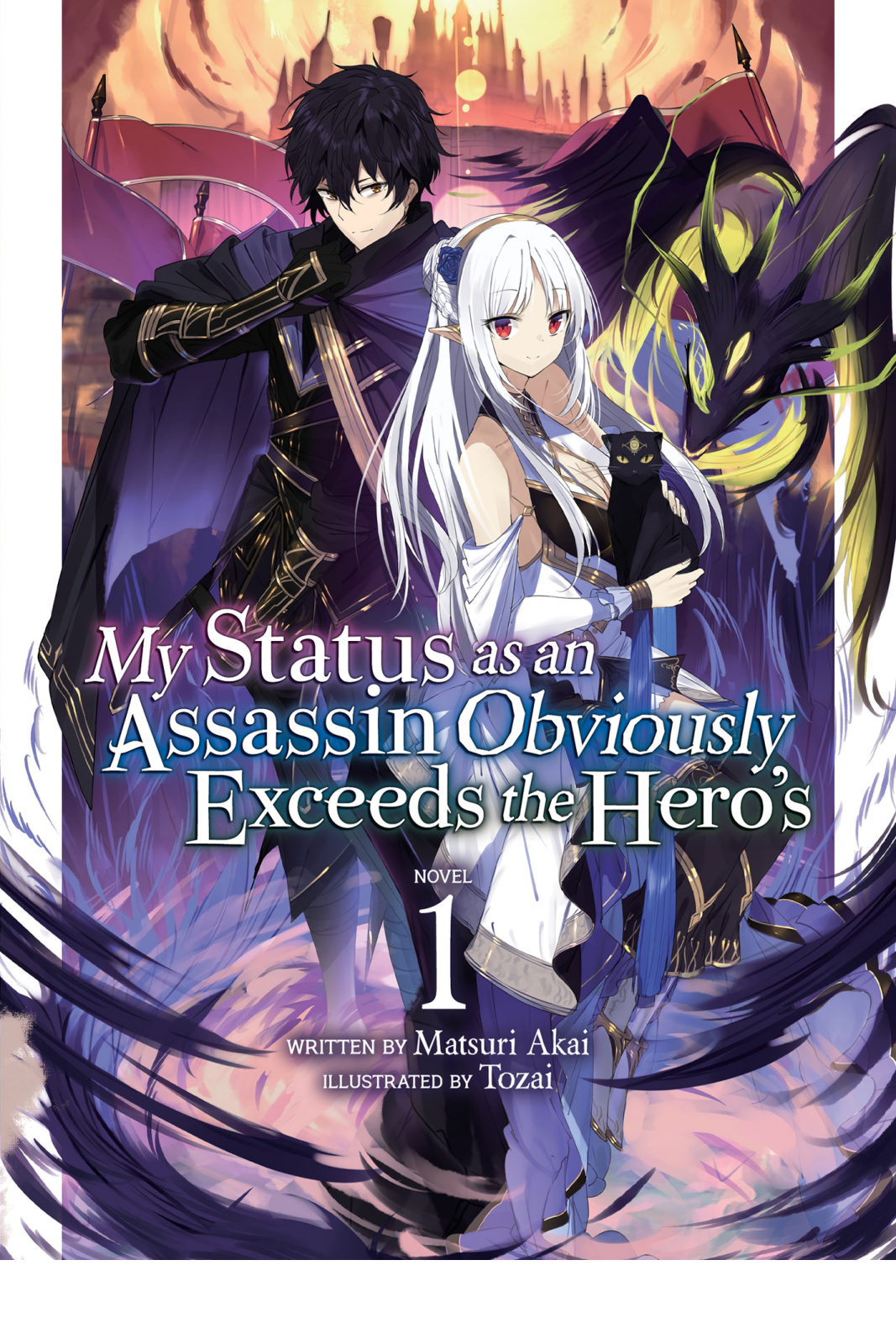


My Status as an Assassin Obviously Exceeds the Hero's Vol. 1

Matsuri Akai

VISIT...

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The background illustration depicts a male assassin with black hair and a purple cape, and a female hero with long white hair and a blue dress. The hero is holding a black cat. A large, dark, multi-eyed monster is visible in the background. The scene is set against a fiery, orange and yellow sky with a city silhouette.

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NOVEL

1

WRITTEN BY Matsuri Akai
ILLUSTRATED BY Tozai

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*“With our
combined
powers, the
boss won’t
even know
what hit it.”*

*“Sure hope
you’re right
about that.”*

*"Winds,
give me
strength!"*

✦ Kilika Rosequartz

*"Time to give you a taste
of your own medicine!
Shadow-clad!"*

✦ Amelia Rosequartz

✦ Oda Akira



“Oh, don’t worry—I’m quite confident in my assets.”

I let my eyes wander down to Amelia’s chest. I hadn’t paid much attention before, but she was right—those were some serious assets she was packing. I fantasized for a moment about what they might look like underneath her clothes but caught myself drooling and snapped out of it.



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Akai**

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Seven Seas Entertainment



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ANSATSUSHA DE ARU ORE NO SUTETASU GA YUUSHA
YORI MO AKIRAKA NI TSUYOI NODAGA VOL. 1

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Prologue

IN A CERTAIN CORNER of the city, a shadowy figure knelt on a slanted rooftop, nearly invisible against the night sky. They loomed there—watching, waiting—utterly motionless aside from the fluttering of their cloak and long black scarf in the breeze. This was unlikely to give the shadow's position away, as their presence was completely imperceptible even to those who knew what to look for. Perhaps the only exception would have been one of their kinsmen.

Eventually, the shadow rose to its feet with a sigh, drew its blade, and braced itself for imminent combat. Sure enough, a man materialized directly in front of them. Just like the shadow, the man was garbed in black and lightly armored. The only noticeable differences between them were their unique weapons and the cloak and scarf the shadow wore.

“Well, look who it is. You here to guard the place, hotshot? Or are you just out to slit our poor guildmaster's throat?”

“And yours, if you try to get in my way,” the shadow responded matter-of-factly. They had no intention of trying to reason with the man.

The man felt a chill run down his spine. Even as a fairly infamous assassin in his own right, he knew better than to challenge the most powerful killer around—the one they said could vanish into thin air at the drop of a hat and cleave through a thousand demons with nary a sound.

“Well, that's just great. Never thought I'd get the chance to go toe-to-toe with the Silent Assassin himself. Lucky me,” the man said sarcastically. He braced himself for combat, though his brain was still flip-flopping between fight and flight. His opponent was small in stature, yet the sheer malice the shadow exuded made him break out in a cold sweat.

The shadow stared back at the man without a shred of human empathy, as a hunter would its prey. Then, with a flash, the shadow's blade rent the frigid night air.

Before the man even knew what hit him, he fell to the ground with his eyes wide and his hands clutching at his neck, trying to stop the geyser of blood spurting from his throat. The shadow straightened and wiped their blade on their scarf before turning their gaze in the direction of their true quarry.

The blade quivered slightly in their trembling hand. The shadow steadied it with their other hand. Then, once more invisible, they slipped soundlessly through the window into the target's bedchambers, where another throat in need of slitting lay fast asleep. If they were successful, this assassination would end all hope the shadow had of returning to a peaceful life. But there was no room for error, and no turning back now.

"Sorry, guys, but I have to do this. It's the only way I'll ever find closure. With this one man's death, I'll be exacting justice for so many people. And one in particular..."

The shadow—a teenaged boy by the name of Oda Akira, who not long ago had been nothing more than your average high schooler—whispered these words to no one in particular, then mustered his strength and made a single, decisive slash.

POV: ????

THE GIRL RAN through mud and muck, stumbling over roots and brambles in her desperate flight from her pursuer. This part of the forest was dense and most people deemed it far too dangerous to traverse, but she had no choice. All she could do was keep running as fast as she could, her long silver hair fluttering behind her.

But she couldn't keep this up much longer. She was rapidly becoming both physically and mentally exhausted. She struggled to make out the terrain through her tears, and she could feel herself slowing with each stride. It was only because her pursuer was matching her pace—taking pleasure in the hunt—that she hadn't been caught.

“Huff... Huff... Argh?!”

Perhaps her assailant had finally grown tired of the chase, as an arrow was shot from behind and pierced her calf. She knew of only one person who could aim so accurately while moving.

“Ugh... Wh-why...?” the girl begged as she fell. The stinging numbness in her leg spread through her body quickly, suggesting the arrow had been coated in a paralytic. The girl realized she was done for.

“Why, you ask?” her pursuer scoffed. Her face was nearly identical to the girl's, only contorted into a malicious grin. “Funny, but that's exactly what I was going to ask you. Why, oh, why, are *you* even still alive?”

The silver-haired girl shook her head. The words were like daggers to her heart. She knew what was coming next, and she would have covered her pointed ears if not for the paralysis.

“*You're* supposed to be the Child of Blight, after all. Remember?”



“No... Nooooo!”

Those were the last words the girl wanted to hear from the mouth of someone she had once considered family. She staggered to her feet through sheer force of will and attempted to run again despite the numbness. But unbeknownst to her, all that lay in the direction she chose was a sheer drop down a rocky cliff.

Her golden-haired pursuer smiled complacently down at the girl, with just the slightest glint of twisted love twinkling in her eyes.

“Farewell, dear sister. I do pray that we shan’t meet again.”

When the silver-haired girl first came to after her fall, she found herself in the middle of an unfamiliar forest. Judging from the nearby ocean and her wet clothes, she guessed she’d washed ashore. Dazed, she scanned her immediate surroundings and determined her current situation was unfavorable, to say the least.

She let out a squeal upon noticing a black slime had come to make her acquaintance. Terrified, she tried to wriggle away, but even though the paralysis had long since abated, her immense fatigue made it difficult to move. She could only watch helplessly as the monster gradually swallowed her from the legs up.

“No, no, no! Slimes aren’t supposed to eat people!”

By the time she finished speaking, her entire body had been enveloped. The slime jiggled a bit, attempting to regain its bearings, but a noise on the other side of the thicket sent it into hiding in the shade of a nearby tree.

“Could’ve sworn I just heard a voice coming from around here,” said one voice.

“What? No way. Nothing but demons live in these parts,” said another.

Upon confirming these passersby were merely average humans, the slime demon dissolved into the soil.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Must’ve just been my imagination.”

“Let’s just go home. It’s starting to get dark out and it’s giving me the creeps.”

As night fell, only the trees remained to stand watch over the

empty forest.

Chapter 1: Summoned to Another World?!

POV: ODA AKIRA

EVERYTHING CHANGED that day—for me, and for every other student in Grade 11, Class 2. It started off like any other morning. The bell was just about to ring when an enormous summoning circle appeared on the floor of the classroom, adorned with mysterious symbols. At first, we were all too dumbstruck to do anything but gawk; it was only when the circle began to glow with a pale blue light that we began to react.

“Everyone out of the classroom! Now!”

But it was already too late. The summoning circle had been activated, and a blinding light flooded the room. I could only squeeze my eyes shut and listen to the shrieks of my female classmates as a gentle floating sensation briefly overtook my body. Next thing I knew, my feet were back on solid ground. When I opened my eyes, I realized my once-simple life would never be the same—we’d been transported to another world.



My name is Oda Akira, and I'd never been one for superstition. Never believed in ghosts, UFOs, or any sort of supernatural happenings either. I'd read plenty of fantasy novels, including ones where the protagonist ended up in another world, and I was certainly capable of putting myself in the character's shoes and reveling in the power fantasy of it all. But there was a big difference between fiction and reality.

"We beg of you. You must defeat the Demon Lord and save our world."

Yet there I was, standing before a king in a strange land—and he was bowing his head to me, imploring me to undertake some heroic task. This was clearly not a dream, but I still had trouble believing it. In my defense, I think anyone would have been flabbergasted by this turn of events. I had a bit of a reputation for being stone-faced (some of my classmates even thought I might be involved in some shady business), but in that instant, a train could have driven through my gaping mouth.

As the blinding light from the circle had abated moments before, we found ourselves standing in the middle of a vast audience hall. I was still totally discombobulated at this point, but I used what little presence of mind I had to scan the unfamiliar location. We were surrounded by thirteen knights and what appeared to be a princess around our age. She was breathing heavily and hiding behind the knights, peeking around them to get a look at us. As I watched her, I realized the knights were carrying staves and not swords, so perhaps they were actually armored wizards. A woolly rug in garish red was spread across the floor, which matched the ostentatiousness of the rest of the vaulted chamber; the ceiling was engraved with intricate designs I had to squint to make out. When I gave up and brought my gaze back down, I noticed someone new was standing in our midst.

"We bid you welcome, brave hero candidates. Please come this way; His Majesty will explain everything," said the old man—likely a butler or a steward—before indicating a large, ornate door.

Some of my fellow students opened their mouths to voice questions or complaints but were silenced by his steely gaze. It seemed we had no choice but to go along with his instructions for now. Through the door, we found ourselves receiving a long lecture about the state of this world from His Majesty—which was usually how the fantasy novels I'd read began.

First, he told us about the world itself. Its name was Morrigan, and like Earth, it was spherical. On its surface were four continents, each the home of a different race: humans, demons, elves, and beastfolk. We had been summoned to the largest of these continents, specifically to a human kingdom known as Retice. And the reason we'd been summoned was as I previously mentioned: the demons had begun a full-scale invasion into human territory, and it fell to us to slay the Demon Lord.

It's like a dream come true! All my favorite tropes in one! I wanted to squeal like a little kid, but I restrained myself. Still, this was the sort of fantasy every teenager dreamed about, and I could tell most of my classmates were struggling to contain their excitement as well. Some of them were less than enthused, looking around nervously as if waiting for the other shoe to drop, but virtually all the male students were downright giddy.

If only we'd known then what trials and tribulations lay ahead.

After a while, His Majesty stepped back and told us his attendant would finish up with an explanation about "stats and so on." Shortly thereafter, the old steward came back in, some sort of crystal ball under his arm, and launched into yet another lecture.

Wait. Where did he get that thing? Hell, I didn't even notice him leave the room to begin with. Sneaky old man.

"Everyone, look into your hearts and repeat after me: *Display Status!*"

Each of us followed the old man's instructions in turn. He gauged our reactions with a curt smile as, one by one, stat tables ripped straight from an RPG appeared in front of us with flashes of light, and our jaws dropped.

AKIRA ODA

RACE: Human

CLASS: Assassin (Lv. 1)

HP: 1800/1800

MP: 700/700

ATTACK: 1200

DEFENSE: 800

SKILLS:

Mathematics (Lv. 5)

Negotiation (Lv. 4)

Assassin Tools (Lv. 1)

Assassination (Lv. 1)

Curved Swords (Lv. 1)

Short Swords (Lv. 1)

Conceal Presence (Lv. MAX)

Detect Presence (Lv. 1)

Detect Danger (Lv. 1)

EXTRA SKILLS:

Understand Languages

World Eyes (Lv. 1)

Shadow Magic (Lv. 1)

Whoa. Looks like most of my skills are stealth oriented. Which I guess makes sense if I'm supposed to be an assassin. But what's with this Conceal Presence skill? How the heck is it already maxed out?

"Hey, Akira! You check out your stats yet?" asked one of my male classmates.

I nodded. He seemed...enthusiastic, to say the least. Not that I blamed him. This wasn't the sort of thing that happened to your average high schooler. Admittedly, I was struggling to contain myself as well, not to mention thanking my lucky stars I'd lived to see this day. Yet a part of me wondered if we were getting ahead of ourselves. After all, we'd just arrived in this strange new world and, so far, had only been given the vaguest explanation as to why. There was a good chance we were all in grave danger, so perhaps it would be best to hold off on the celebrations until we had more intel to work from.

"So, what class did you get?" I asked him.

"Wind mage. You?"

"Assassin."

“See, I knew it! I *knew* you’d end up being a ninja or some shit. Feels like you’re *always* just disappearing and reappearing out of nowhere during lunch and stuff like that.”

“Oh, shut up. It’s not like I’m *trying* to be invisible or anything... most of the time.”

He wasn’t wrong, though. Any time I made an effort to hide from people, no one could find me. I’d even had a reputation as a kid for being unbeatable at hide-and-seek. It had reached the point where nobody wanted to play with me, as sad as that sounds. And whenever we played kick the can, even the people who’d been sent to jail and were eagerly waiting to be set free often wouldn’t notice me making a break for the can until after I’d already kicked it. Basically, my Conceal Presence skill had been pretty high-level from a young age—I just hadn’t had the stat page to prove it until now.

Either that or people just thought I was supremely forgettable, which I guess is possible. Oh, god... Have I had it wrong my entire life? No, let’s not follow that train of thought—it’ll only make me sad.

Aside from having the one skill maxed out from the start, my stats seemed pretty reasonable. Heck, maybe that wasn’t particularly abnormal in this world. After all, other skills I’d used in my normal life were also higher than level one. Mathematics, for example, must have been boosted thanks to all the random formulas I’d memorized over the years (and would probably never have to use outside the classroom). And my Negotiation skill level could be attributed to regularly haggling with the old fart who ran the local produce store; I could tell he’d hated my guts for it, but I was glad to have had the experience now. Talking it out might not be of much use in open combat, but we were all at a disadvantage in this strange new world—who knew when a little persuasion might come in handy?

“Now I’m just wondering who the hero’s gonna be,” said my classmate.

“Yeah... I think I’ve got a pretty good idea,” I responded, stealing a quick glance over at the corner of the room where a flock of girls had congregated around another male student with a shit-eating grin on his face. Well, not literally—he was pretty good at playing it cool, actually. But if he thought I didn’t notice his lips curled up in a self-satisfied smirk, he was dead wrong.

He was Satou Tsukasa, class dreamboat. Good grades, handsome

face, and great at sports to boot. He was also our student council president. If he wasn't cut out to be the hero, I didn't know who would be. His only real flaw was his inability to hide the smug grin that appeared on his face whenever his harem started going gaga over him. Everybody probably assumed he'd be the hero, including him—it was written all over that very face. Maybe the girls could sense it, too, as they were crowding him in even greater numbers than usual, and the boys looked on with jealousy.

It was the same scene as always—just in a different place. Come to think of it, who *was* this random wind mage standing here next to me? I knew he was one of the few classmates who occasionally made an effort to talk to me, despite my dogged efforts to remain the biggest loner in our class, yet there was absolutely nothing memorable about him. I couldn't even remember his name. And it would be incredibly embarrassing to ask him now. *Oh, well. Guess I'll never know.*

"Now then, hero candidates," said the old man. "Please step forward one by one and place your hands on this crystal ball. It is a magical artifact that can read and display your stats for all to see. Let us see who among you is stronger than all the rest." He set the crystal ball on a pedestal and stepped away.

I frowned. *So we're expected to just let everyone else see our stats, then? I think I'd rather not, thanks. There's no telling who we can trust. For all we know, this could be a trap.*

I recalled a novel I'd read in which the "heroes" were only summoned to serve as meat-shield foot soldiers in the army. While I had no reason to believe that was what was going on here, you could never be too careful. After all, we still knew next to nothing about this world. Frantic, I scanned my surroundings and racked my brain, trying to think of a way out of this. I noticed some statuesque suits of armor along the walls of the room. It was hard to tell from this distance if there were soldiers inside them or not, but if there were, I couldn't afford to try anything rash. "Come along, now. You first." The old man beckoned to one of the female students—Sano Miko.

If our class had a mascot, it would have been her; she was always bubbly. She stepped forth and reached out a tentative hand to touch the crystal ball, which lit up and beamed out her stat page for all to see. The font was large enough that even the suits of armor along the walls would have no trouble reading the fine print.

“Whoaaa!”

Our classmates all stared in amazement at the projection, apparently not having considered that sharing one’s stats could be risky for even a millisecond. As my fellow classmates *oohed* and *aahed* at this mystical otherworldly technology, I gazed up at the girl’s stat page and could scarcely believe what I saw.

MIKO SANO

RACE: Human

CLASS: Barrier Mage (Lv. 1)

HP: 180/180

MP: 130/130

ATTACK: 150

DEFENSE: 130

SKILLS:

Mathematics (Lv. 5)

Sewing (Lv. 7)

Cooking (Lv. 5)

Barrier Magic (Lv. 1)

Recovery Barrier (Lv. 1)

EXTRA SKILLS:

Understand Languages

“What the hell? She’s so weak.”

Just when I thought I’d finally come to terms with the whole “summoned to another world” business, I felt a new wave of confusion and disbelief coming on. In all the fantasy novels I’d read, even the boring party members were generally comparable in strength to the hero, and even if they weren’t, they at least had about the same number of unique skills in order to make them viable adventurers. Sure, she had a few skills at decent levels, but the disparity between her stats and mine was so great that we couldn’t be compared, and I wasn’t even the hero. Perhaps it was because she was less of an offensive class and more

of a defensive one? But that theory sank as soon as the next person laid his hand on the crystal ball and the crowd *oohed* and *aahed* once more.

KATSUMI WATABE

RACE: *Human*

CLASS: *Brawler (Lv. 1)*

HP: *180/180*

MP: *300/300*

ATTACK: *200*

DEFENSE: *200*

SKILLS:

Mathematics (Lv. 3)

Fisticuffs (Lv. 3)

Martial Arts (Lv. 2)

EXTRA SKILLS:

Understand Languages

“What’s going on here?” I mused to myself.

“I know, right? Like, how does that crystal ball even *work*, man?” said the wind mage.

Wasn’t talking to you, but whatever.

“All right,” I said to myself. “Let’s give these new skills a whirl, shall we?”

After a few more students placed their hands on the crystal ball and it became clear none of their stats were even a tenth as high as mine, I used Conceal Presence to try and make myself invisible. If this was anything like when I’d played hide-and-seek, then I should have become completely undetectable to the average person. It was unfortunate there was no easy way for me to test this, because if I misjudged it and made a scene, I’d be forced to reveal my hand. I decided to stick around and see if our so-called hero’s stats ended up being higher than mine. If they were, I could simply turn off the skill and take part in the ceremony.

However, they were nowhere close.

TSUKASA SATOU

RACE: Human

CLASS: Hero (Lv. 1)

HP: 200/200

MP: 350/350

ATTACK: 800

DEFENSE: 500

SKILLS:

Mathematics (Lv. 7)

Mesmerize (Lv. 5)

Martial Arts (Lv. 2)

Swordsmanship (Lv. 2)

Elemental Magic (Lv. 1)

EXTRA SKILLS:

Understand Languages

Holy Sword (Lv. 1)

Some of his skills were admittedly quite high, and Elemental Magic was always a nice perk, but his general stats were far lower than mine. And yet, somehow, I doubted all the girls would cheer and shout for me like they did for him.

What's going on here? Why are my stats so OP? Did the summoning glitch out or what?

“Now *those* are the kinds of stats and skills that befit a hero,” chuckled the old man. “The average human born into this world can hardly reach 100 points in attack power. Even our hardest warriors never break 500. Yet here you are with nearly twice that from the very beginning! I think it’s safe to say we’ll beat the Demon Lord quite handily with you on our side.”

The old man flashed a suspicious grin, and a chill ran down my

spine. It was hard to say for sure, since we'd only just met the guy, but in that moment, I sensed something was *really* not right here. Come to think of it, I'd gotten the same funny feeling from the king earlier, as well as from the young woman who I suspected was his daughter—the princess—and her wizardy knights who'd presumably summoned us to this world. All of them had welcomed us with the same artificial smiles. I began to feel like we were being watched, so I looked up at the ceiling. Sure enough, a reflective black orb was looking down at us. Was it some sort of magical surveillance device? I couldn't say for sure.

I scowled. *I've got a bad feeling about this. Something tells me we're not gonna like where this story ends.*

I found an empty bedroom down a hallway and proceeded to flop down onto the cushy mattress and stare up at the ceiling. It was a lovely, spacious room that would likely have cost well over ten thousand yen per night if it were in a hotel. The bathroom was impressive as well. If these rooms were intended for a single occupant, then the castle was quite luxurious indeed. It didn't seem like it was being used at the moment, but I assumed it was still being cleaned on a regular basis, as none of the white furniture was dusty.

"Damn it. And here I thought I'd be playing on easy mode. Usually the assassin's job is just to go off on little scouting missions while the hero does most of the actual work, but nooo..." I grumbled to myself. Of course, this was all assuming my little hunch was correct, and that was seeming more likely by the minute. *Man, what a rip-off. I ended up with the hardest job of the whole damn team, didn't I? Of all the awful luck... Oh, well. Guess my first order of business is to figure out what exactly the king and his inner circle are plotting.*

I kind of felt like I had the ability to tell what other people were thinking—maybe it had something to do with my Negotiation skill. But if that black orb really was a camera, then I'd have to be extra careful going forward. I was the only one who hadn't touched the crystal ball, so if they noticed me and tried to match my face to my stats from the ceremony (which they might well have a visual record of), I'd be in deep trouble. I wasn't supposed to be in this part of the castle either. I had no choice but to stay invisible until I could escape.

Thinking back on it now, I probably could have made a decent living back in my world as a professional thief. Sure, I'd never thought

of my ability to sneak around as a tangible “skill” before, but I’d used Conceal Presence to get into some pretty dicey spots, and as long as I was able to stay in a security camera’s blind spot... Honestly, I could probably have even pulled off a bank robbery. Not that I ever would have.

“Guess I’ll just have to keep a low profile for now. Man, this is gonna be annoying. Why did it have to be me?” I grumbled as I donned the black cloak I’d procured on my way to the room. The closets in my classmates’ rooms had been filled with outfits for each of their respective roles, but as I hadn’t shown myself or my stat page, I’d had to find clothes for myself. I’d been a bit on edge sneaking into the castle armory, especially since there were guards on duty, but I’d simply kept my presence concealed and been able to get in and out without a hitch.

Perhaps I’d make a fine bank robber yet—if I ever made it back to my own world, at least.

I decided to make this bedroom my base of operations for the time being. I felt a bit guilty, but not too much, since I didn’t think it was in use. While our class consisted of forty students, twelve of them had been out of the classroom during lunch hour, so only twenty-eight of us had ended up in this world. With so many rooms to clean, I doubted the castle maids would keep count of us. They seemed like the type to cut corners anyway—I’d noticed garbage piling up in a few of the other rooms I’d scoped out.

“All right, time to head out.” I slipped out the window and quickly scaled the walls up to the roof. Ever since I was little, I’d loved high places. Leaping from spire to spire, I made my way to the top of one of the castle’s five towers and scanned the surrounding cityscape.

“Damn... So this is the royal capital, eh? Definitely lives up to the title.”

I could see everything. The glimmering lights of the industrial district dotted the edge of the skyline. I thought I saw a few roads lined with streetlamps as well, and some other lights I couldn’t quite make out. But given that there was magic in this world, it only stood to reason that they’d have some form of illumination magic. From a technological perspective, they were about as far along as Japan after the first industrial revolution. Not too much artificial light, and you could tell they were still getting used to the technology. All the nighttime light was centered in the heart of the city. Unfortunately, this

meant the back alleys and side streets were probably a haven for criminals. Though there also didn't seem to be very much foot traffic at night, so perhaps my Japan comparison was inapt after all.

I filed these observations into a corner of my mind and tried to get a feel for my more immediate surroundings.

Great. Doesn't seem like anyone's nearby. I scurried my way over to the central tower where the royal chambers probably were—not to mention the tightest security—and slipped in through an open window. *Now, if I were the king, where would I be?*

With silent steps, I made my way down the hall, stopping in front of every door to listen in and see what I could hear. I'd only heard the king's voice once, but I couldn't forget his eerie tone. I'd thought nothing of it when he first stepped out to greet us, but thinking back on his voice was giving me hives.

It wasn't long before I found my mark, as I heard his voice leaking through a heavy wooden door. *Could this be his personal study?*

I stood with my ear to the door and listened.

"So how goes the little brats' orientation, Maria?"

"All according to plan, Father. I think they've just settled into bed after a long day of excitement. None of them suspect a thing—how could they? They're only children, after all, and far too dazzled by our world's magic to realize they're being used."

"Good. Then we proceed as planned. But remember, they must not be allowed to enter the castle archives. Have Saran commence with their basic training on the morrow."

"Yes, Father. All shall be done in accordance with Your Majesty's grand design."

I'd been expecting to uncover something like this, but it still sent shivers down my spine. To think these people who'd been smiling and welcoming us only hours ago had actually been luring us into their sinister plot. Sure, we had our fair share of liars and cheats back in my world, but I'd grown up in Japan, where that sort of thing was extremely uncommon. Even though I'd suspected something was up, part of me had still wanted to believe I might be overreacting—but not anymore.

Just as the princess stepped out of the study, I concealed my presence and slipped in through the open door, taking note of her wicked expression as she passed. No semblance of the polite, dignified princess who had greeted us remained. I wondered if perhaps all girls could turn their feelings on and off like flipping a switch; most guys I knew weren't very good at hiding their true intentions to that degree.

I stalked through the bookshelves of the impressive study in search of the king. As a book lover myself, I was half-tempted to see what kinds of volumes lined the shelves, but now wasn't really the time. I pulled out a silver dagger from beneath my cloak. I'd pilfered it from the armory along with the clothes since it seemed like a fine-edged blade, but I'd never expected to have to use it so soon.

At the far end of the room, I found my mark. He was sitting at a desk, writing with great fervor. Remaining undetectable, I closed the gap until I was standing directly behind him.

A terrifying thought popped into my mind: *I could kill him, right here and now, and no one would ever know it was me.*

If he really was as vile as I suspected, then I could put an end to his evil schemes before he ever had the chance to implement them. Granted, it wouldn't solve the Demon Lord problem, so we probably wouldn't be allowed to go back home right away, but it would at least resolve the most pressing threat.

I also still didn't know his true objective. Why had he summoned us here in the first place? I knew frighteningly little about this world and this country.

But more than anything, I lacked the resolve to kill a man with my own two hands. It wasn't just a matter of assassinating someone—I wasn't sure I could kill another human even if my own life was on the line.

I left him there that night, fleeing back to the safety of my own room. I wouldn't come to regret the decision until one month later.

Being summoned to another world had always seemed like it would be a wonderful experience. Sure, it had been exciting at first, but now that I was actually in another world, I started to yearn for the

peaceful, easy life I'd known back in Japan.

Here I was in a strange new world, with better stats than the hero of the party—who was nothing more than a narcissistic prick—but pretending I didn't exist. I was also the only person who knew the royal family was up to no good, as my classmates were taking everything at face value.

Man, I wish I could go home.

I hadn't gotten much sleep due to my late-night recon mission, and I'd had a terrible dream to boot, so I was quite grumpy as I sat in the dining hall the next morning, shoveling flavorless gruel into my mouth. In the dream, I was chased by a gigantic cockroach—scourge of kitchens everywhere. Needless to say, I was very relieved upon waking.

My classmates were all making pleasant small talk over breakfast, and I felt just the slightest bit of resentment toward them. *If only I could be blissfully unaware that our lives are in ever-present danger here*, I caught myself thinking.

Part of me wanted to flee the castle to go explore this vast new world and just forget about the king's evil plot. I supposed the only reason I hadn't already was due to some lingering sense of camaraderie I felt for my fellow classmates. I wasn't about to stand by and let them be taken advantage of; I had to find some way to throw a wrench into the royal family's schemes.

"Excuse me, everyone! Could I have your attention, please?" asked the hero as everyone finished eating. All the clamor and chatter in the dining hall instantly subsided. It seemed everyone had accepted the hero in his role.

Everyone except for me, that is.

"I think I speak for everyone when I say that we're all still pretty shaken up from being summoned here yesterday. So I figured this would be a good opportunity to make sure we're all on the same page as to what's going on and what our next moves should be."

Well, well. That was quite the convincing opener for such a lackluster hero. Guess he'd really taken the hero designation to heart—or just let it go to his head. One or the other. I sensed a cringeworthy speech coming on.

"Here in this world, we're not just students. We're strong.

Probably stronger than the vast majority of the native inhabitants. Heck, we could probably conquer them all if we really wanted to.”

What the hell was this dumbass getting at? The smiling faces of the dining hall attendants turned stone cold. Couldn’t blame them. I’d feel the same way if the legendary hero who was supposed to save *my* world said something like that, even as a joke.

Don’t these idiots realize that we’re at a huge intel disadvantage here? We can’t be acting all flippant like this. I wanted to wring his little neck, but I sensed his speech was far from over, so instead I decided to keep my presence concealed and my mouth shut.

“But we can’t forget our Japanese pride, now can we?! I don’t know about all of you, but I firmly believe that helping those in need, even when there’s nothing in it for you, is part of what makes us Japanese so special. So I want to use these newfound powers to help the people of this world and defeat the Demon Lord. Who’s with me?!”

Oh, shut up. My classmates didn’t know a damn thing. Had they even considered the possibility that this “Demon Lord” wasn’t *actually* ravaging the land, slaying humans indiscriminately? How could they know for certain the king and the princess were to be trusted? I mean, you only had to look at the plush lifestyles they enjoyed to know their circumstances couldn’t be *that* bad. Why, even this breakfast—bland though it was—was still far more than the daily ration of bread you might expect during wartimes. There were four separate side dishes on top of that—*four*! At my house, I was lucky to even get two.

“I-I’m with Tsukasa here, guys!”

“Yeah! Count me in!”

“Me too, me too!”

“D-don’t forget me!”

And so the number of victims of the hero’s charisma increased one by one, until eventually all the other students had rallied under his banner. I decided to keep myself concealed for the time being. It was possible that no one except the wind mage had even realized I had been summoned as well. “Thanks, guys,” said the hero. “Then let’s all work together and save this world!”

The other students let out a roaring cheer, and I was struck by a sudden wave of secondhand embarrassment. I planted my elbows on the

table and let out a heavy sigh. *Guys, I know we're in high school, and you all think we're young and invincible, but could we please have a little more shame?*

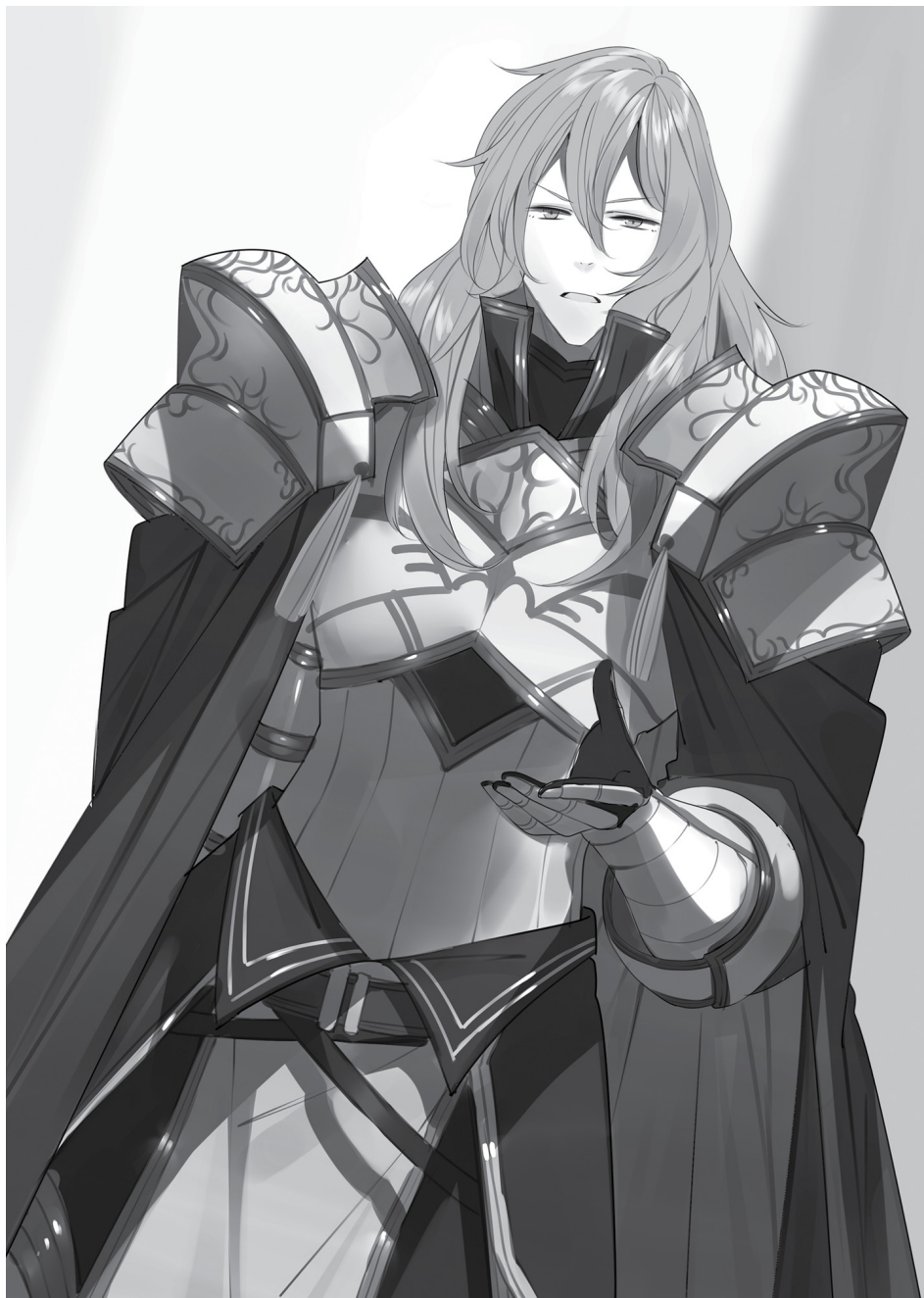
I found myself more and more tempted by the idea of abandoning the fools, heading out on an adventure of my own, and using my OP skills to get famous and live happily ever after. If only I could get ousted from the group on false charges or something, like what always happened in these sorts of novels. Then I'd have a perfect excuse to leave the castle. But for now, I just had to swallow my pride and stay put.

A few hours after the buffoon brigade had mutually agreed to save the world, we were finally given armor and weapons for our respective classes and summoned to the castle's training grounds—which were far bigger than our school's track and field, and probably the entire campus.

Taking care not to have my appearance noticed, I made myself visible and joined the rest of the group. *Not sure how they plan to teach us fencing, archery, staff-wielding, and magic casting all at once on the same field, but I guess we'll find out. Wait a minute... Is that a morningstar? Hot damn.*

“Welcome, brave heroes. My name is Saran Mithray, and I am Knight Commander of the Kingdom of Retice. Some call me the country's ‘Last Bastion,’ though that *does* sound a little pretentious coming from me, doesn't it?” The man chuckled and brushed his luscious locks out of his face.

Really? This is the knight commander? Looks more like the castle's resident pretty-boy to me.



“You should really be more professional in front of the troops, Commander!”

I felt an immediate kinship with the vice commander (who seemed to have a good head on his shoulders) as he scolded Commander Saran with a harsh whisper—even if it didn’t stop the long-haired fop from laughing. Still, I sensed his smile was genuine, unlike the royal family’s, and my intuition told me I could trust the vice commander. Not that I was about to let my guard down.

“Oh, pish posh,” said the commander, waving him off. “Now then, my little heroes. In one month’s time, we will be traveling to a nearby labyrinth in order to test your mettle. Until then, we’ll be conducting training exercises here at this hour each and every day. King’s orders, I’m afraid!” His carefree demeanor was in contrast with his serious words.

Something told me I was going to have a hard time getting a read on this man. *Group training exercises, eh? Yeah, not really my bag. Think I’ll pass.* Just as I was about to be on my way, I noticed the fear that had taken hold of my fellow classmates’ expressions and the way they murmured amongst themselves. *What’s the matter, fellas? Thought you were gonna save the world.*

The Knight Commander had apparently noticed their unease as well, and he looked none too pleased.

“W-wait a minute. We only have one month?” asked one student.

“Yes? Will that be a problem?”

“Can we really get strong enough to take on an entire dungeon in a single month?”

“Oh, certainly. Why, I’d even go so far as to say that if you all *aren’t* strong enough to handle the labyrinth after a month of our meticulous instruction, then the problem lies with *you*, not us.”

I watched as the hero winced at the commander’s insinuation. *Right, I forgot how much he hates being talked down to.*

“I’ll be frank with you: We knights of Retice take great pride in being humanity’s last line of defense. If you think we’ll step aside and be shown up by a bunch of kids from a magicless world without a fight, you’re dead wrong,” the commander said with a wry smirk. He’d clearly struck a nerve and caught the ire of my classmates.

It was then that he made eye contact with me, and I smiled knowingly back at him. I didn't mind him underestimating my peers, but I wouldn't let him do the same to me (even though I was probably the most stubborn child here). His eyes widened, then he went right back to smiling—albeit with a more winsome expression.

Yeah, yeah. Keep smilin', pretty-boy.

Every girl in the group had her eyes locked on the commander for a good while after that, but apparently, he had nothing more to add. The knights divided us into groups based on our weapon types, and the groups spread out to practice their specialties.

Not me, though. Have fun in training, suckers. I'm off to go check out the castle archives. Whaddya mean, it's off-limits? That just makes me even more curious. Besides, they'll never even know I was there.

POV: SARAN MITHRAY

I WATCHED AS THE BOY in the black garb concealed his presence and attempted to slip away from the pack. Apparently none of his colleagues were able to sense his presence—none of them even batted an eye as he walked away. Even I hardly noticed him; I only caught him out of the corner of one eye. We'd only made eye contact for a split second, yet I had a feeling he'd turn out to be a very interesting case indeed.

"You take it from here, Gilles. Start them out doing one-fifth of our usual training regimen."

"Wh—Commander?!" wailed Vice Commander Gilles as I foisted all responsibility onto him and headed off after the boy.

I hoped Gilles wouldn't tear his hair out from the stress of trying to wrangle the little kiddos while I was gone. Though if he did, I supposed I could just give him a nice vacation.

Now, if my intuition was correct, and the boy's Conceal Presence skill level was as high as it seemed, then his Detect Presence skill level would be fairly low in comparison. After all, if you could conceal your presence perfectly, you didn't really need to worry about accidentally bumping into anything.

"And where do you think you're going, boy?" I snuck around him from behind and stopped him dead in his tracks. His eyes wavered, intensely wary. *Interesting. He's not a mindless sheep like the rest of them, then.*

"I'm impressed... I didn't think anyone could see me," said the boy.

Seeing his genuine surprise came as a bit of relief to me. He appeared to be the most mature one of the bunch, so if he'd ignored me and gone on his way, I don't know what I would have done.

"I'm guessing I was the only one who did. Let's just say there's something special about my eyes," I said, tapping a finger below my right pupil, the eye with which I'd captured his presence.

The boy raised both arms in defeat and turned off the skill. I could now see him with both eyes.

“Interesting. So there are people with enchanted eyes here, too, eh? This really is your bog-standard fantasy novel world... Sorry, Commander Saran, was it? I assume you’re here to punish me for skipping training. Well, go right ahead—boil me, mash me, stick me in a stew.”

I was a little taken aback by this. For one of the hero’s retinue to know about Mystic Eyes was a strange thing indeed. I’d heard there was no such thing as magic in their world, so how could this boy know about such a specific facet of ours?

My mystic eye was the result of an injury I’d suffered during a battle with the Demon Lord long ago. After it had healed, I’d found that my right eye could see things invisible to the average person, like changes in the body heat of living organisms; I’d first noticed it when my knight cadets appeared blue before training and bright red afterward. Apparently, it was a phenomenon that could, on rare occasions, develop in the eyes of those injured by the Demon Lord or his minions.

I knew of others who’d inherited Mystic Eyes from their parents and could see things far off in the distance or interpret the value of any given object by a supernatural sheen and luster. My abilities were fairly rote by comparison, though I could still use them to see through most illusory and concealment skills used by stealth-based classes. Mystic Eyes was an Extra Skill, after all.

Extra Skills, like Mystic Eyes, were more advanced than regular skills and couldn’t be superseded by them. I wasn’t entirely sure *why* this was the case, but if a regular concealment skill like Conceal Presence was up against an Extra detection skill, the detection skill would always take priority. In addition, Extra Skills were exceedingly rare, and they only ever manifested in the most gifted of individuals. When an average person faced someone with an opposing skill, victory fell to the individual with the higher skill level. These summoned hero candidates always had at least one or two Extra Skills, but in my experience, Conceal Presence was always a regular skill for assassins, and this boy was no exception.

“Let’s dispense with the boiling and mashing, shall we? Why don’t we talk about something a little more fun?” I was eager to learn more

about the boy—not only because he'd known about Mystic Eyes, but because of the way he used his skills so naturally that even my trained knights hadn't noticed him slipping away. For someone untrained and from a magicless world, his ability made no sense.

"So tell me," I continued, "what exactly were you sneaking off to do? And be honest; I promise I won't drag you back to training by the ear or anything like that."

It seemed my hunch about the boy being harmless was right, as he answered my question straight away.

He told me he'd been heading for the castle archives, which were indeed off-limits to the hero and his party. I asked him what he intended to look into there, and he said he simply wanted to know more of what people would consider common knowledge about this world. My smile broadened. *Of course he does—he and his little friends only just got here, after all. They don't know the first thing about this world; it's only natural they'd be curious. It's ridiculous to keep them from the archives.*

If anything, I felt the other children were far too trusting for taking the king's orders at face value. This boy really was different from the rest.

"I see... So tell me. What level is your Conceal Presence skill?"

"It's maxed out. Or, well...it says it's maxed out on my stat page, but I don't know if that's completely maxed out or maxed out for now."

Max Level, eh? The usual skill cap was Level 9. I'd heard anything higher than that would be labeled Max Level, but that there was no way to tell whether a skill actually increased in power beyond that point. It was where the metric stopped. My own Swordsmanship skill remained peaked at Level 9, and I knew of only one other person who'd reached Max Level in any skill.

"And what of your other skills?" I asked.

"Pretty average, I assume. Most of them are only Level 1. But they're the kinds of things I never had a chance to get good at back in my world, y'know?"

I was desperate to learn more about his world, but I restrained myself, as there were other things I needed to make sure of first. "But you're an assassin, correct? Are you telling me you don't have any other

assassin skills?”

“I mean, I do. I just don’t know how to go about raising them higher than Level 1.”

“Oh, is that all? In that case...I could teach you, if you like.”

The boy looked extremely opposed to my kind proposition. That was probably the smartest reaction. A merchant friend of mine once told me that anything offered for free would always cost you more in the end, especially when you were a stranger in a foreign land.

“Well, I can tell you right now that you won’t find what you’re looking for in the castle archives. All the truly interesting books about this world—its magic and skills and what have you—are locked away in the king’s private study.”

“Oh, are they? Well, that makes things easy. I’ll just have to sneak in there again.”

“Though I also have to warn you—you won’t find most of the things our world considers common knowledge written out neatly and concisely in any book.”

While the boy was disappointed to learn that he wouldn’t find any *Beginner’s Guide to Morrigan*-type books, they unfortunately didn’t exist. Common knowledge wasn’t the sort of thing you read in a book—you absorbed it gradually via cultural osmosis from the day you were born. In any case, I was more interested in that last word he had accidentally let slip.

“Wait a moment,” I said. “What do you mean, ‘again’?”

“I snuck in there last night. You’ve really gotta step up your security game—all the guards had their thumbs up their asses. But anyway, why are you telling me all of this? What’s in it for you?”

“For the record, the royal knights have no jurisdiction in those quarters, so your insinuation about my men is extremely uncalled for, but as for what’s in it for me: I’m glad you catch on so quickly. I want to know more about the world you come from. That will be more than enough recompense for my services. I’ve always loved learning about different cultures, you see. Even as a little boy, I read every book in the house from cover to cover.”

“All right. You’ve got yourself a deal.”

We clasped hands in agreement.

Then I started shaking my hand up and down, and the boy looked perturbed yet didn't let go. I leaned into the gag and shook it harder, only releasing it when the boy started becoming visibly irritated. I was very good at reading faces, you see.

"So what perks do I get if I raise my Assassination skill, anyway?"

"Well, you'll be able to regulate your body temperature, for one. Then even I won't be able to detect your presence. I've heard you also eventually gain the ability to conceal not just your presence but your footsteps and footprints as well."

"Damn, seriously? Sounds like I'd better get to work, then," whispered the boy, and I smiled at him.

A good assassin was a more fearsome threat than any warrior or mage. You never knew when they might strike, and they said the best ones could kill a man before he even knew what hit him. In that sense, they might've been one of the strongest classes out there; even the hero himself could only fight head-on, while an assassin did the exact opposite.

If this boy were to learn the king's and princess's true colors, then maybe—just maybe—I could entrust him with the righteous task we'd been working toward for so long. For the good of the country.

POV: ODA AKIRA

WE SAT DOWN on some little stone seats we found in one of the castle's less trafficked courtyards and took a moment to enjoy the flowers. I noticed some butterflies fluttering about that looked eerily similar to the swallowtails we had back home, and I felt an inexplicable emotion welling up inside.

Apparently, Commander Saran was going to teach me about this world's mythology today. I wondered if it was similar to Greek mythology, which always had a bit too much jealousy and infidelity for my liking.

"Well, let's start by discussing the god of this world, I suppose."

The world of Morrigan had only one central god: Eiter, the God of Creation. First, Eiter created the sky and the earth. Next, he created the many races of the world in his image—the humans, the elves, the demons, and the beastfolk—and gave unto them sentience and emotion. He gave each of them land on which to live, labor at which to strive, and finally, the power of stats.

He watched over his creations and hoped that, in so doing, he could heal his weary heart, which had grown old and jaded from the quarrels of gods.

So even the gods get in fights from time to time, huh? Well, maybe it wouldn't be that way if those other gods weren't so damn lazy! Eiter's out here busting his ass, and you losers won't even lift a finger to help him?! Though if he really expects his own creations to "heal his weary heart," I feel like he needs to lower his expectations a bit. Sure enough, it didn't take long before Eiter's creations started to imitate the very gods he'd created them to replace. They raped and pillaged, fighting over land and property, starting wars over women and crusades over men. Soon the four races refused to coexist, and each claimed a part of the land for themselves. In his rage, Eiter rent the land asunder into four separate continents and created fearsome monsters to ravage each.

The demons, being the only race that could control the monsters to do their bidding, were shunned by the other three and driven out to the desolate hellscape of Volcano. The elves, well known for their love

of nature, took for themselves the sacred land of Forest, and they became the guardians of the Holy Tree that lay within it. The humans and beastfolk fought for many years over the remaining two continents, until the humans emerged victorious and claimed for themselves the largest and most bountiful continent of Kantinen. The beastfolk, defeated, resigned themselves to the remaining continent of Brute, where feral beasts reigned supreme.

Hang on a minute. So you're telling me that each continent's name is just the English word for its most defining feature? At least they had the decency to obscure "continent" into "Kantinen," but the others? No excuse. Also, where have I heard the name Morrigan before?

"And that's how the world of Morrigan came to be the way it is today."

"Kinda sounds like the humans are the bad guys here."

"I...*suppose* you could look at it that way. That's not a sentiment you'll find among many people living here, however," Commander Saran assured me.

I found myself thinking I'd perhaps be better off reading all of this in a book after all. True, it might be less digestible than an oral explanation, but it would certainly go a lot faster. I decided to head for the castle archives after all and stood up to leave.

"Wait, where are you going? You still haven't told me about your world yet," said the commander, grabbing me by the arm. His arms were slender but powerful, as I discovered upon trying (and failing) to wrest myself free. I looked up to see a devious glint in his eyes.

By the time I was finally free from Commander Saran's custody, it was almost night. I assumed he would have kept me there too, had a grumpy Vice Commander Gilles not come to fetch him. He'd been looking for the commander ever since training got out, and he literally dragged Commander Saran back to his duties. The way the commander kept grinning gleefully in spite of his impending discipline made me wonder if perhaps he was a bit of a masochist. The vice commander clearly wasn't joking around though, as he let the other man's head bonk against a stone wall as he dragged him around the corner.

I'll have to be careful not to get on that guy's bad side, I thought to myself.

I thought back on the brief conversation I'd had with Vice Commander Gilles just a moment ago, before he'd absconded with his superior officer.

"Sorry about that, kid. Our commander just doesn't know how to control himself when something or someone piques his interest."

"That's okay. I learned an awful lot from him too, so it evens out. In fact, I'll probably be coming by the knights' barracks to talk with him again sometime soon, if you don't mind."

Not everything Commander Saran had told me could have been learned from reading a book. Perhaps it wouldn't be too hard to find reference texts for the story of creation and the other myths and legends, but there were plenty of other, more nuanced topics we'd discussed as well. I was certain that without a tutor to clarify details, many of those things would have been utterly unintelligible to me in written format. And Commander Saran's explanations were about as succinct and intuitive as I could have hoped for. I very much appreciated that he was able to turn off his usual eccentricity to discuss serious business.

"Oh, no, I don't mind at all. As long as the commander finishes his paperwork beforehand. He should generally be done with his duties by this hour, so feel free to come by at any point during the evenings."

"I'll do that. Thanks."

"My subordinates are carrying on like I don't even exist... What a sad day indeed..."

Sir Gilles and I had waved goodbye as we went our separate ways, neither of us paying Commander Saran's "poor me" act any mind.

So that's how you take the air out of the commander's sails. Very interesting. I'll have to keep that in mind.

Though it was now dinnertime, I didn't have much of an appetite, so I returned to my room and plopped down on the bed. I couldn't get the commander's words out of my head.

"For decades, we've treated the demons as if they were our mortal enemies. And when I say 'we,' I mean not just humanity, but the elves and the beastfolk as well. We drove them into the most uninhabitable corner of Morrigan for no reason other than that they could control monsters at will."

Not the best excuse for the persecution of an entire race, now was

it? Though I guess they got off pretty light, really. Some people wouldn't be content to banish them and leave it at that. Some of us, if we were serious about wanting someone beat down, would hound them until we broke their spirit. Not that *I* would know anything about that.

Jokes aside, I did feel kinda bad for the demons.

I stared up at the spotless ceiling, ruminating on the day's events.

"What's really going on in that head of yours, Commander?"

The man had a powerful memory. He could probably recall each and every word anyone ever told him about. It wasn't that he'd ever taught a 101 class on the history of this world before—it was just that each and every detail remained crystal clear in his mind for years after he first heard it. It was hard to imagine him as human rather than some sort of walking encyclopedia robot—though I had a feeling he'd be at least a little offended by the thought. *Not that he'd have any idea what a robot is.*

POV: SARAN MITHRAY

“HAVEN’T SEEN YOU do that in a while,” said Gilles, having finally relinquished his grip on my collar. He looked resentfully down at me trying to regain my footing and patted the dirt off my clothes.

If you’re going to pat the dirt off me anyway, don’t drag me on the ground in the first place. I kept that little thought to myself. *I’m a very forgiving person, you see.*

“Quit flattering yourself and actually respond to me, would you?”

Sometimes it really did feel like Gilles was a mind reader. *Please stay out of my inner thoughts, would you?*

“You mean it’s been a while since I took such a liking to someone?” I asked.

“Well, yes, there’s that. But mostly I meant that it’s been a long time since I saw you actually enjoying yourself.”

“Ah.” Perhaps he was right. I wore a fake smile every day, but I hadn’t smiled and laughed until my jaw hurt in a good long while. I suppose that only went to show how much of an interest I’d taken in that boy and his world.

“So what exactly did you two talk about?”

“About their world. In exchange, I told him a few tidbits about ours.”

Akira’s words had hit my ears like a ray of hope beaming through dark and clouded skies. To be honest, I’d been a wee bit suspicious of him and his friends. Obviously I knew it had been a kingdom tradition since time immemorial to summon heroes from another world using an ancient spell passed down through generations, and to entreat them to defeat the Demon Lord of the current era. However—and perhaps this was just my skeptical nature talking—I wasn’t going to take the reports that the princess and her court wizards had successfully carried out the summoning ritual at face value until I’d verified it with my own two eyes. Even after seeing them in my class, part of me still didn’t believe it; I hated how stubborn my mind could be at times. But after hearing that young boy tell me about their world in his own words, I finally

breathed a sigh of relief.

“Was it really *that* fascinating?”

“Oh, yes. Everything he spoke of was completely new to me, and you know how much pride I take in my encyclopedic brain.”

“Goodness. He even stumped Saran the Sage?” Gilles gasped, reviving my old nickname. “What exactly *did* he tell you?”

“Well, apparently their world runs on something known as ‘science,’ sort of like how ours runs on mana,” I explained, before recounting the many fantastical things Akira had told me as we walked. By the time I was finished, we’d arrived at our personal living quarters inside the castle.

“Self-propelled carriages, giant steel vessels flying through the sky...” Gilles summarized. “The ability to transmit information all the way across the world in the blink of an eye, or even hold a remote conversation with someone through a tiny metal tablet that fits in the palm of your hand. It’s all rather unbelievable, isn’t it?”

“I couldn’t agree more, my friend. And would you believe these children come from a place known as ‘Japan,’ as well? Ring a bell? Historical documents tell us that’s the name of the world from which the very first hero was summoned.” I sat down in a chair and scrunched my brow between my fingers. Gilles, in all his consideration, brought me a glass of water, which I downed in one gulp. “Thank you, Gilles... But do you know what’s even more baffling? I believe every word. The boy’s eyes spoke true.”

Not to brag, but I had an uncanny ability to see through deception and falsehoods. I hadn’t been made Knight Commander just for my good looks, you know.

“If *you* believe him, then I suppose he must be telling the truth... So what do you intend to do with him?”

“Well, that’s just the thing. The boy is hiding his true abilities, you see. I think he actually might be a fair bit stronger than our intrepid little hero. Why, he told me his Conceal Presence skill is already at Max Level,” I said matter-of-factly.

“Max Level...?” Gilles gawked. “But hasn’t there been only one person in history who ever reached Max Level? The very first hero—the Hero of Legend?”

Indeed. For those of us who were born in this world, Level 9 was as high as it went. In truth, reaching even that was but a remote possibility, and precious few of us ever broke Level 7. But for whatever reason, those who arrived in Morrigan from another world had an uncanny ability to reach higher levels with ease and could even overcome that skill ceiling. It was one of the few concrete differences between them and our native people.

“I don’t have the Extra Skill needed to verify this claim for myself, of course, but I have no reason to believe he was lying about that either.”

“But if that’s the case,” Gilles said, stroking his chin, “then why hasn’t the king taken notice of him yet? ...Oh, wait.”

“Now you’re getting it. He used his Conceal Presence skill during the ceremony and didn’t touch the crystal ball. It’s amazing how effortlessly he’s adapted to using skills, I tell you. The boy’s a quick learner,” I gushed, though I was sure he’d protest such lavish praise were he in the room with us.

“Sounds like quite the prodigy... Are you planning to bring him into our ranks?”

“I am. I want to temper his abilities. Or, at least, help him discover the latent potential lying within him and help him focus only on the skills he truly needs. Trim the fat from his training regimen, so to speak.” I’d made a point to ask him what his personal training regimen would be, and I could hardly believe my ears. The boy seemed to be quite the hard worker, despite his cynical personality.

Gilles assented to my decision without a word of protest and retired to his own quarters for the evening.

I suppose I’d better get some rest myself. Tomorrow’s shaping up to be a very busy day.

Chapter 2: The Trap

POV: SATOU TSUKASA

U*GH. Oda Akira... I can't stand that guy.*

I could never seem to escape him either. Ever since kindergarten, we'd always ended up in the same class somehow. Over time, it started feeling less like a series of hilarious coincidences and more like a curse. Even after studying like crazy and making it into a prestigious high school where hardly anyone from our sad little junior high could hope to be accepted, I walked in on the first day of school and found him right there, in the same class as me. He, on the other hand, clearly didn't see any irony in this, as he couldn't even be bothered to remember who I was half the time. I remembered one instance when, on the first day of seventh grade, I went up and started talking to him only to be greeted with:

"Hey, nice to meet you. I'm Oda Akira. What's your name?"

We'd been sharing the same classroom for nearly a decade at that point—sometimes our desks were even right next to each other—yet he *still* couldn't remember who I was? At the risk of sounding arrogant, I thought I was a pretty good-looking guy, and certainly more memorable than a loner like Akira, so what was his deal?

Suffice to say, I'd never been his biggest fan. He was always off in his own little world, making other people feel like idiots for trying to interact with him. I didn't much care for the way his brain worked either. Anything he didn't actively care about, he just purged from his mind completely.

That hadn't changed here in Morrigan, either, even with me being the center of attention. He was always good at making himself invisible, so of course they made him an assassin, and he'd been abusing those abilities to disappear and go off on his own to do who knew what.

Doesn't he know you're supposed to stick together as a team when you find yourselves in unfamiliar territory?! Why won't he ever look my way?!

I'm the hero, goddammit! I don't have time to be worrying about one stupid loner! I've gotta focus on saving the world!

Try as I might, I couldn't stop myself from losing my cool when it came to him. The mere thought of him was enough to get me heated. I was supposed to be the hero of this story, yet I couldn't even keep my composure about one of my own teammates. I was doing everything I could to boost everyone's morale, but Akira always just looked at me with disdain, like I was making a complete ass of myself. I couldn't even give him a piece of my mind for skipping training, because none of us even knew what room he was staying in. It was enough to make me want to scream. How in the hell were we supposed to take down the Demon Lord if we couldn't even work together? Did he just not care about ever going home to our world? We didn't have room on our team for people who only dragged us down. He was a loose cannon, and no sane person would ever want him as an ally.

Well, except for one, I guess.

"How's training going, Akira?" asked Commander Saran.

"It's going. Gotta say, though—that special regimen you cooked up for me is brutal."

"Ha ha ha! But you seem to be holding your own! Why, even Gilles threw in the towel before you did."

"Yeah, I guess my stamina's in a good place, at least."

For some inexplicable reason, Akira was in the knight commander's good graces. And it seemed he was rapidly getting better at concealing his presence as a result. I was supposed to be the hero and I was having a hard time building up my stats, but he made it look easy. I couldn't imagine he was stronger than me—after all, how could an assassin ever surpass the hero? But I made up my mind to hone my abilities as much as I could over the next month so Akira and the knight commander would have no choice but to notice my superiority during the upcoming labyrinth raid. They'd learn the hard way that the hero always won in the end.

"I'm coming for you, Akira... Just you wait!"

POV: ODA AKIRA

THE NEXT MONTH came and went, and the big day finally

arrived. In case you were wondering, yes, one month in the Morrigan calendar was the same length as on Earth—apparently, they hadn't had a calendar before the first hero arrived and explained the concept to them. In fact, past heroes had introduced quite a few cultural innovations to the people of Morrigan, especially in terms of the culinary arts. The food in the castle was still fairly bland, so I assumed that at some point, they'd summoned a hero from a country not known for having particularly flavorful cuisine.

Maybe I'll have to go out into the city to see if they've got anything with a little more oomph down there. Like some curry or something... Great, now I'm thinking about my mom's signature curry. I wanna go home, man.

"All right, I take it we're all accounted for?" Commander Saran asked. "Then it's off to the Great Kantinen Labyrinth for us."

"The *what* now?" I heard someone mutter under their breath.

Some others shared the confusion. Up until now, our destination had been referred to only as "a labyrinth," implied to be nothing more than dingy old ruins. None of us had known it had an imposing name. Or rather, none of us were *supposed* to know. I'd heard Commander Saran mention it by name a few times before.

He proceeded to gleefully expound upon the labyrinth's name and history to the entire class.

The commander may have had his eccentricities, but he really was a good instructor. His breadth of wisdom knew no bounds, and he had a real knack for sharing it. Had we been on opposite sides, he'd certainly have been the first person I'd want to take out. Not that I could ever picture myself betraying Commander Saran.

"So you see, there are four great labyrinths in the world of Morrigan, each named after the continent on which they are found," he began. "As such, we call this one the Great Labyrinth of Kantinen."

There were some nods of comprehension from my fellow classmates.

After his explanation was complete, castle attendants brought out five healing potions and five mana potions for each of us to bring along on our journey. One small drizzle of healing potion over an open wound, and it would heal up instantaneously. Commander Saran made a show of cutting his own forearm, then applying some healing potion to demonstrate how it worked. Some of the hero's retinue were a bit nauseated by this display, and I couldn't help but wonder if they were really ready to go out and slay monsters. Vice Commander Gilles, clearly used to the procedure, didn't even bat an eye. He simply shook his head at the commander's ostentatiousness.

I think we all set out from the castle under the assumption that it would be at least a bit of an arduous trek to the labyrinth, so imagine our surprise when we discovered it lay just beyond the nearby forest. I had to wonder if it was truly wise to build the capital so close to a giant monster den. In theory, the beasts could escape and raze the castle to the ground in no time at all, if they were so inclined.

"Ah, but the castle's enclosed in a powerful magic barrier, you see. So we're at no risk of being besieged by any old monster riffraff," said the commander, apparently having deduced my thoughts yet again from my expression alone.

I swear, this guy's some sort of mind reader.

As soon as we'd made it out of the forest, I was surprised to see a large crowd of people had formed at the entrance to the labyrinth. We shielded our eyes from the light as we stepped out from beneath the trees. Some among us recoiled at the sheer size of the crowd. As soon as the people saw us step out of the woods, they came stampeding toward us like housewives during the evening rush at the supermarket. We all stopped in our collective tracks like a deer in headlights. The knights who were accompanying us made an attempt to hold back the throng of people, but the crowd was so large, I was sure they couldn't hold the line for long.

"Keep walking!" snarled Commander Saran in a harsh whisper. "You're heroes, remember! You need to hold your heads high before the citizens!"

He'd only muttered the words under his breath so that the commoners couldn't hear, but it was such a stark contrast from his typical friendly tone that it hit me like a bag of bricks. Since when had the commander grown a backbone? Or perhaps it was some sort of

intimidation skill.

“It’s Commander Saran!”

“Sir Gilles! Over here!”

“Is that the hero?! Is that him?!”

High-pitched cheers rang out from the crowd. Commander Saran and Sir Gilles were evidently quite popular with the common folk. Though at least some of the cheers were directed our way. Our lame duck of a hero stood at the front of the pack, putting on airs and grinning from ear to ear. He *was* a pretty face, if nothing else.

I concealed my presence and brought up the rear. As I scanned the crowd, I noticed a single hooded figure staring daggers back at me—likely a girl, judging from their stature. She was glaring at us with such disdain, you’d think we’d killed her parents or something. I wasn’t sure what beef she could possibly have with us, this being the first day we had even set foot outside the castle. Either way, I wished she would knock it off, because it was creeping me out.

I slipped away from the pack and approached the hooded girl. I noticed Commander Saran watching me go out of the corner of his eye, so I wasn’t too worried about being left behind—though maybe a little worried about the lecture I might get for breaking rank and file. But I was already halfway to the mysterious girl, so whatever.

“You there,” I called out to her, as politely as I could. “What are you glaring at us like that for, if you don’t mind me asking?”

The hooded girl swung around to face me, clearly startled to have been confronted. She didn’t answer.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’m not going to turn you over to the knights or anything. I’m just curious what inspired that intense rage in your eyes.”

At last, the girl begrudgingly responded.

“Everyone treats you like heroes,” she began, “but do you have any idea what kind of sacrifices have to be made in order to summon you here?” Her voice was clear as crystal—the soft, sweet voice of a young woman, as I suspected. Probably around our age.

“No, I’m afraid I don’t know anything about that, sorry.”

“I see. Then let us speak again once you uncover the answer for yourself. Because something tells me this won’t be the last time we

meet,” she said, before disappearing into the crowd of people.

“I sort of get that impression, too, weirdly enough,” I whispered to myself. *So the summoning process requires some kind of sacrifice, eh...?*

I’d definitely read some revenge novels where the hero could only be summoned at the expense of their family members’ lives in the real world, or by sacrificing countless members of an oppressed minority in the fantasy world. I didn’t want to even think about the former being a possibility. The latter could come back to bite me here too. If my hunch about the king’s evil plot was correct, I had to wonder what their end game was.

I stood there, ruminating, until Commander Saran concealed his own presence and shoved his way through the crowd to come and fetch me.

“Watch out! It’s headed your way!”

“Aiiiiieee!”

“Heal me! Somebody heal me!”

As my classmates cried out in distress, I let out a heavy sigh. Then, with a single flourish of my dagger, I handily cut down the giant rat that was assailing one of my female classmates; I was pretty sure she was supposed to be a fighting class too.

“Man, what a mess. These guys are all dead weight—they’re only holding us back.”

“I’m afraid I have no choice but to agree with you,” said Sir Gilles, who’d just stepped in to save one of my other classmates from the horde of oncoming rodents.

When I thought about how this sorry state of affairs could have been completely avoided, I let out another sigh.

Things had gone relatively smoothly for the first thirty or so floors of the labyrinth—which was to be expected, given that we were supposed to be the saviors of this world, summoned for our heightened stats and abilities—but now the dungeon was really starting to bare its fangs. My classmates, who’d generally been holding their own in one-on-one combat until now, were shaking in their boots. We did have the knights along to protect us, but there were far more of us than them. They could only carry the team so far, then the hero’s retinue had to

come in and pick up the slack.

For reference, “the hero’s retinue” wasn’t my way of referring to all of my other classmates. Commander Saran had split the twenty-eight of us up into four teams, with the hero’s retinue comprising the seven most powerful fighters in the class (other than myself, of course). The commander had placed me on a team with some of the more mediocre students at my request. This was partially because I didn’t want people getting suspicious about my stats, and partially because I couldn’t stand the idea of being on a team with the idiot hero. Mainly the latter, to be honest.

In any event, it was one of the idiots in the hero’s retinue who’d gotten us into our current predicament. He should have known better than to screw around in a dangerous labyrinth, but he got full of himself and rushed ahead, ignoring the commander’s orders, and ended up pressing a suspicious rock in the wall. My Detect Danger skill had tipped me off to the fact that this was one of the labyrinth’s many traps—if that wasn’t obvious enough already—but I didn’t say anything until it was already too late. I guess I’d assumed that no one would be stupid enough to fall for such an obvious trap. Yet fall for it he did, and all the lanterns lining the walls immediately turned red to signify his mistake.

“Everyone, stay in formation!” yelled Commander Saran, drawing his sword and bracing for imminent combat.

Soon, a horde of rats came surging out from a hole in the wall. They were among the weakest enemies, and we’d fought plenty of them leading up to this point, but never in such overwhelming numbers. There must have been thousands of them.

“Great. Way to fall for the most obvious beginner’s trap, guys,” I grumbled.

As the knights, myself, and our hotshot hero got into ready positions, the rest of my classmates were shrinking in fear, struggling to even hold their weapons straight. Some of the girls even fell shrieking to their knees. Thus had begun our current state of pandemonium.

“Should we pull back, Commander?” I asked.

“I... Argh... I suppose so. I didn’t think...we’d lose so much morale so quickly, but...we still made great progress...for a first attempt.” Commander Saran spoke in sentence fragments between swings of his mighty blade, taking out multiple enemies with each slash.

I could tell he was getting tired, too, even if he still wasn't tapping into his full potential. "Heroes, fall back to ground level! I shall clear the way out! Be sure to help your tired and wounded comrades, should they need it!"

With this, the commander thrust his blade skyward.

"O Lord, give me strength! Divine Sword!"

The beasts were vanquished in a flash of blinding light as he brought his blade crashing down upon them, carving out a single clean path through the rats. My classmates nearly tripped over one another as they scrambled toward the staircase. A few of the rats gave chase, but I took them out with some well-aimed throwing knives.

"We should make haste as well, Akira. You can't handle this many at once. Let's fall back," the commander suggested.

"Right behind you," I agreed.

He had the right of it—while an assassin could go toe-to-toe with a higher-level opponent and potentially come out on top, they were at a distinct disadvantage against multiple foes. I'd been trying to think of ways to circumvent this weakness but hadn't come up with anything yet.

"O scorching flames, burn these beasts to ash! Blazing Bullets!"

"O mighty gale, rage and fan this inferno! Wind Blade!"

One of the knights cast an area-of-effect fire spell, and Sir Gilles followed it up with a wind spell to fan the flames. This technique had been handed down from one of the early generations of heroes, apparently. It was difficult to control, however, so they didn't attempt to use this combo move until most of the students had made it safely to another floor. That being said, Sir Gilles had amazing control over his wind magic—never blowing out the flames, only amplifying them. It must have taken a lot of training and extreme discipline to pull off such a feat.

As the monsters cried out in agony, I took the commander's advice and beat a hasty retreat myself. But I soon discovered that an even greater threat lay in wait.

As we escaped from the scene of the battle, the monsters predictably gave chase.

"O Lord, grant us thy protection! Sanctuary!"

Commander Saran extended his hand and created a wall of light that blocked the entire corridor, disintegrating all monsters that dared to touch it. Light magic, often called holy magic, was one of the higher-tier varieties of magic and could vanquish lower-level monsters on contact.

Man, why do we even need a hero? I feel like these knights could take down the Demon Lord, no sweat. Hell, even the commander could probably wipe the floor with him solo.

Perhaps sensing the insinuation of my gaze, Commander Saran shook his head and sighed.

“I’ll explain later why that would be a very bad idea indeed.”

I swear, this guy really can read minds.

After running up a few flights of stairs, we heard a cry from above us. It sounded like the voice of Sano, our bubbly mascot girl. She was always trying way too hard to be cute, so I wasn’t really her biggest fan. Then again, I wasn’t really a “fan” of anyone in our class, but there were a few I could at least tolerate.

“I’m going to go see what’s happening up there,” said Sir Gilles, before running up onto and along the wall.

Guess it’s not just Commander Saran that’s full of surprises.

Not many people could run up walls while wearing a full suit of armor. It spoke volumes to the level of speed, agility, and balance Sir Gilles possessed. Normally you’d think only stealth classes would be capable of such a nimble feat. And yes, I could run on walls in Morrigan, too, if I put my mind to it, but I wasn’t sure I’d be able to do it in full plate armor, and certainly not as effortlessly as Sir Gilles did. He really was something else.

“Eeeeeek!”

A glass-shattering shriek rang out through the labyrinth once again. It sounded closer than the last one, perhaps because we’d picked up the pace. This time it wasn’t Sano’s voice but another girl’s. I pushed myself as hard as I could until we arrived.

“What is that thing?”

“Wait a minute... Is that—?!”

The knights and I were at a loss for words.

“GROOOOOAAAARGH!”

“Barrier mage, keep up that wall! Healers, cast your strongest healing spells on him!”

I could hardly believe my eyes. My classmates were facing off against a gigantic monster far too high-level for this floor of the labyrinth. It was a minotaur—a beast with the head of a bull and the body of a man.

“Th-th-that’s impossible!” gasped one of the knights. “Minotaurs only appear in the deepest depths of the labyrinth!”

I clicked my tongue with disdain at the cowering knight and dashed off toward the minotaur’s feet. Commander Saran was already well on his way, running directly beneath Sir Gilles. I caught a fleeting glimpse of the hero, struggling to hold his blade aloft as he and our classmates attempted to retreat. Sano was still maintaining her barrier, albeit barely, and Sir Gilles was keeping the minotaur occupied for the time being, but there was no telling when the monster might shift its attention. My classmates were dead weight buffoons, to be sure, but I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night knowing I’d let them die.

I dashed along the wall like Sir Gilles had and leapt over to the beast, plunging my silver dagger into its throat. I watched as the green jewel embedded in my blade’s hilt traced a jagged path down its neck.

Wait! What?! The dagger had, in actuality, shattered to pieces against the minotaur’s thick hide. How was that possible? Surely no natural beast could have such a rock-hard hide. Even though my dagger was only a decorative blade meant for the nobility, I’d never put a single scratch on it during training, and I’d been using it every day. The beast was simply *that* rock-solid. I tossed aside the now-useless hilt and ran behind the beast until I was standing side by side with the hero.

“Akira?” he said with an incredulous frown, yet I could tell he was at least somewhat relieved to see me.

“Hey. What the hell happened here?” I asked, as we both watched the commander and his knights trying to keep the minotaur at bay. As the hero stood there on wobbly feet, struggling to even keep his weapon aloft as the casters enveloped him in healing light, he explained to me what had transpired.

POV: SATOU TSUKASA

AFTER THE BRAWLER of my group, Watabe Katsumi, activated the trap, we all ran upstairs, leaving the knights and Akira to take care of the rats. I had no doubt the knights wouldn't have any trouble dispatching such low-level enemies, but I was a little worried about Akira. From what little I'd observed, he did seem to be a fair bit more powerful than the rest of us, but I had no idea how well he could handle himself in a fight. I also knew assassins weren't well-suited to fighting multiple enemies at once. If something were to happen to him, it would be my responsibility; Watabe Katsumi was a member of my crew, so his mistakes were mine to bear. I was sure our other classmates would say the same thing. Even though we were still in the early floors of the labyrinth, that rat trap had taught us we couldn't get careless.

As we fled for the exit, I realized there'd be more monsters on the upper levels to contend with. Probably only a handful of them, mind you, but they would still pose a threat in our exhausted state. As we ran and ran, one of my classmates eventually panted out an idea.

"Wait a minute. Didn't they give us those monster-repelling smoke bombs?"

I could have slapped myself on the forehead. Indeed, just before we'd set out for the labyrinth, the princess herself had personally gifted me a set of smoke bombs. Akira and the knights hadn't been there when it happened, so of course they hadn't thought to use them on the rats.

"Please use them if you ever find yourselves in peril. They may come in handy," she'd said with a radiant smile, handing me the box set—twenty-seven in all.

"All right, well, we don't know how effective these things are, so let's just have each group try using one for now," I instructed the others.

First, Sano's group tried throwing one directly down at the ground. After about thirty seconds or so, it seemed to take effect, as monsters stopped coming after us. They'd start to approach us, sure, but after taking a good look at us, they'd scurry off in wide-eyed horror. We weren't sure if the repelling effect was on the ground where it'd been

used or on the people who'd used it, however, so after a few more minutes of walking, we had the group Akira was assigned to toss another. We ended up using nearly all our smoke bombs before we found the staircase leading upward, and just as we did, a few dozen small monsters came running after us.

"Now!" I said, instructing my group to use our very last smoke. Weirdly, this final bomb (which the princess had given to me personally) gave off a different colored smoke than the rest. Maybe I was just imagining things. The monsters quickly dispersed regardless.

Then a shriek rang out. Sano noticed it first, and she pointed at the cloud of smoke in horror. When the rest of us turned our gazes toward it, our jaws dropped. A giant monster had emerged from the wall near where we'd thrown the last smoke bomb. I recognized the beast from Greek mythology, and it was clearly not the sort of a monster that was supposed to appear in the upper floors of the labyrinth.

"A minotaur?" I whispered in disbelief as the beast raised its massive club overhead.

I looked into its eyes—it was about to bring its weapon crashing down right onto Sano. Before I even had a chance to think, I dashed over and shoved her aside, then tried to deflect the monster's club with the edge of my blade. It was a parry I'd learned from practicing with the knight commander. I knew there were certain types of monsters capable of blocking certain skills, so I wanted to see how well I could manage if I had to fight with swordsmanship alone.

Never think about whether or not you can tank a hit from a more powerful enemy. Always think about whether or not you can dodge or parry, the commander had said. *If an enemy comes at you with all it's got, you've got to deflect that charge with all you've got.*

But simply dodging didn't create an opportunity for a counterattack, hence why parrying was always preferred. Try as I might to get a good strike in on the commander, he'd deflected every single slash with ease. Now here I was, trying to do the same thing he did to me against an even more fearsome foe. The results were more than obvious.

"Aaaaagh!"

"Tsukasa!"

A searing pain shot through my wrists. The beast's strike had broken both my arms. I'd somehow managed to keep my grip on my sword, but the blade had snapped clean in half like a twig. The minotaur's next swing would surely kill me. Sure enough, the monster lifted its heavy club up off the ground and raised it over its head again, preparing to crush me like a bug.

I heard someone else cry out from behind me. *If you're just gonna stand there and scream, could I at least get a healing spell, please?! Wait, no. I need to not be so self-centered.*

Just as the minotaur was about to bring down its weapon, a projectile of some sort struck its club off balance, and the attack missed its mark.

"Looks like I made it in the nick of time." Standing there beside me, haggard and out of breath, was Vice Commander Gilles. "Commander Saran will be here any minute. I'll try to keep it occupied until then. Stand back."

"Yes, sir. Thank you so much."

"Looks like you did pretty well for yourself."

Yeah, right. Me and my two broken arms are just bringing down the team. Sir Gilles patted me on the head nonetheless and, trying not to cry from the pain, I retreated back to where my classmates had congregated.

"Tsukasa, your arms..."

"O divine protector, grant us thy shelter. Take this mana and create for us a safe haven. *Shield!*"

"Thanks, Sano..." I said, trying to force a smile despite the pain.

"It probably won't withstand a single blow, but I figure it's better than nothing!"

She'd veiled the entire group in a thin barrier of light. I assumed it was the best she could do at her current skill level, but it was a far cry from the barriers I'd seen the commander erect. *Guess that's the real difference between us kids and the big boys.*

I looked over at Sir Gilles. He was holding the minotaur at bay with his sword and his magic, though none of his attacks were doing much to harm the beast.

“Barrier mage, keep up that wall! Healers, cast your strongest healing spells on him!” Sir Gilles yelled after casting a quick glance our way; he’d evidently noticed my deathly pallor. Suddenly, I was enveloped in a warm and gentle light, and the pain began to subside at last. A minute longer, and I probably would have passed out.

“Commander!”

Commander Saran had finally arrived to lend Sir Gilles his support. Perfect timing. But not a moment later, another figure manifested itself right beside me.

“Akira?” I muttered incredulously—though to be honest, I was relieved to see him. I explained to him as succinctly as possible the events that had transpired, bringing him up to speed.

POV: ODA AKIRA

AFTER THE HERO finished his little summary, I glanced down at his wounds and grimaced. He had scratches and scrapes up and down his entire body, and his broken arms were turning purple with bruises.

“Damn. I’m surprised you haven’t passed out yet.”

“Yeah, you and me both. But if I don’t protect our classmates, who will?”

I snorted at our precious hero’s arrogance, and he looked a bit offended. But it was possible he hadn’t even realized it himself, so I figured I’d set the record straight, for the sake of both him and our classmates.

“Yeah? And who’s gonna protect *you*?”

“I mean...”

“Your job isn’t to keep the rest of us safe. It’s to defeat the Demon Lord.” I looked him straight in the eye for the first time in forever. The students behind us were all listening in, murmuring in anticipation of what I was going to say next. “So don’t worry about us. We’ve got your back. You just focus on doing you.”

“But who’s gonna protect everyone else?” the hero pouted.

I smirked.

“We can take care of ourselves. Like I said: You just focus on you, big guy.”

It was such an obvious thing, yet the hero’s eyes widened as though the thought had never occurred to him. I was the selfish type, so any time I’d happened to use my skills to help someone else, it was either whim or pure coincidence. I understood the desire to keep the casters and support classes safe, but he really needed to let the other combat classes handle that. *You’re their hero, not their babysitter. Surely they must have covered that in your basic training for babies by now, right? These guys are such idiots.*

“Focus on myself?” he repeated incredulously. “But...I’m the hero... I thought saving people was the hero’s job...”

Suddenly, the hero started grunting and groaning, clutching his head in his hands. I could tell immediately something was wrong with him.

More so than usual, that is.

The hero I knew was a natural-born leader—the sort of guy who *looked* like he only ever thought of himself, but in reality was always looking out for the rest of the team. Granted, he cared way too much about what other people thought of him, and he was still a womanizer who used his looks to take advantage of people, but he at least knew how to step up when the going got tough. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been student council president. At the very least, he wasn't the sort of guy to have a mental breakdown just because someone gave him some constructive criticism.

Then a thought hit me.

“Hey, do we have any healers or disenchanters here?” I asked, and two girls sheepishly stepped forth from the pack.

“I’m a healer,” said the first girl—our class representative, Hosoyama Shiori.

“And I’m yer disenchanter...” said the second in her distinctive accent. This was Ueno Yuki, a girl who was all pep, all the time. “You don’t think there’s somethin’ wrong with him, do ya?”

“Hard to say,” I said. “But we’re about to find out.” I was impressed with myself for being able to put names to both of their faces, since I generally didn’t pay much attention to my classmates. I’d started trying to after we got to this world, in order to remember their respective classes, but I’d just failed on that front.

“Could you try healing his broken arms, for starters?” I asked Hosoyama.

“S-sure thing. It might take a while, though.”

I gave her a nod to indicate that I didn’t mind, and she got started right away. The hero’s arms were soon bathed in a gentle light, though he still had his head in his hands like a scared child during a thunderstorm. Apparently, the pain wasn’t so bad that he couldn’t keep pulling at his hair in distress.

“What about me? Whaddya need me ta do?” asked Ueno.

What are you, dense? Do I really have to spell it out for you?

I thought it was fairly obvious what might be wrong with the hero, even if I hadn't fully confirmed it yet.

"I think he might be brainwashed. I want you to try using *Dispel* and see if that works."

The other classmates gasped at my hypothesis, and Ueno seemed a little flustered by the sudden pressure, but she started the incantation nonetheless.

"O baleful curse that plagues my comrade's dreams! Return from whence thou came, never to afflict us again! *Dispel!*"

Another aura enveloped the hero—though this one was nothing like the gentle light of Hosoyama's healing spell. It was black and malevolent, like flames of darkness.

"Oh my gosh, y'all! He really *is* cursed!" Ueno gulped, and the other students gaped in disbelief.

I glanced back over at the knights, who were still engaging the minotaur. The battle was getting pretty fierce. *Man, I wish I could go help 'em out.*

Honestly, I probably could have left the hero to Hosoyama and Ueno—but a funny feeling gnawed at my chest. But before I had time to analyze it, a boy who'd kept quiet up to this point suddenly called out to me.

"We'll take it from here, Akira. You go help the commander. You'll be of way more use to them than we ever could be," he said.

"Besides, it's time for us to step up! We're not gonna let Tsukasa carry the team all by himself any longer!" said another with a valiant twinkle in his eyes.

"You guys..."

"Now go on! Get moving!"

Impelled by the others, I relented and headed toward the minotaur. With my dagger broken, my only hope of taking down the beast would be clever use of skills. Thankfully, I was pretty sure I'd devised a scheme that could get us out of this deadlock.

"Commander Saran!" I yelled.

"Akira! Are you sure it's wise to abandon the others?" he responded, never taking his eyes off the beast. It sounded like he was a

bit more worried about my classmates than he usually let on.

“Yeah, about that. Seems like the hero’s been hit by some sort of curse. Our disenchanter’s doing her best to try and lift it, but I honestly think it’ll be faster if we just find and kill whoever cast it on him.” It wasn’t that I doubted Ueno’s skills, more that I feared the curse might be much stronger than any of us were equipped to handle.

“Very well... I think I might have an idea who it was; I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks. Also, I was thinking this might be a good time to try out my you-know-what.”

“You don’t mean...”

The idea of having Saran look into the curse was all well and good, but we still had to make it out of here alive before he could do that. I knew he’d be resistant to the idea, but I was pretty certain it was our best shot at felling the beast.

“Yeah, I do. And I’m doing it whether you help me or not. I refuse to die down here.”

The commander let out a deep and heavy sigh. I was mentally prepared for him to give me a lecture right then and there, but instead he simply raised his head and smiled.

“Very well. If that’s how it’s going to be, then I’ll give it my all... Though I fear even that may not be enough to take down this minotaur. I’ll need your help if we’re to make it out of this alive.”

“Yeah, no duh. I’m not gonna let you die here either. Not when there’s still so much I need you to teach me about this world.”

“Good...because I have plenty more questions for you as well. I’d love to hear more about ‘smart phones’ and ‘aero-planes’ and what have you.”

“Sure thing. I’ll give you every juicy detail. *If* we make it out of here.”

And on that note, I activated Conceal Presence, making me invisible to the minotaur—and everyone else, except our commander with his mystic eye. That said, the beast was currently too preoccupied with the other knights to pay us any mind. Still, you could never be too careful.

“If we don’t pull this off, it will be awfully hard to ensure that the others make it out of here safely. Be very careful.”

“I know.”

With my superhuman jumping abilities (the first skill I noticed after Conceal Presence, and the fastest one I mastered), I leapt over the minotaur’s head to get behind it. Seeing that I’d concealed my presence, and that the commander was charging up for some sort of spell, the knights who’d been engaging the minotaur quickly guessed the plan and got out of the way as fast as they could. Smart move. When Commander Saran and I had tested this combo during training, we couldn’t control it, and it almost razed an entire forest. I closed my eyes and waited for the commander to do his part, paying no heed to the great beast that stood directly in front of me.

“O Lord, give me strength! Shine down upon your children and smite these foes that would obstruct us! Lightning’s Flash!”

The bolt of white-hot light crashed down upon the minotaur, singeing its furry hide and damaging its eyes in their sockets, temporarily blinding it. The monster bellowed in agony—we’d finally managed to put a dent in the beast. Cheers rang out from my classmates, who were watching the battle play out on pins and needles.

“Akira, now!”

Hearing the commander’s signal, I opened my eyes and turned off Conceal Presence. I reached out my hand and uttered my own incantation.

“Shadow Magic, activate.”



An explosion of darkness erupted across the floor. Not like a literal explosion, mind you—I'd simply taken the long shadow cast from the beast due to Lightning's Flash and amplified it such that this entire floor of the labyrinth was immediately cloaked in darkness; the brightest lights cast the deepest shadows, after all. Yet oddly enough, despite the entire room being veiled in pitch-black darkness, you could still make out your surroundings. The minotaur too, was briefly confused by this, but it soon set about trying to whack the commander with its club again. It wouldn't get very far, though.

"Oh, no you don't. Reel him in, boys," I ordered the shadows, and the beast stopped dead in its tracks.

In truth, I was using the shadows to restrain it, but to the outside observer, it probably looked like the beast was obeying my commands. Before long, the minotaur bellowed and wailed in distress as it realized it was being dragged down into the darkness. Bit by bit, the monster was swallowed up by the shadows until only its severed head remained.

Having fulfilled their purpose, the shadows receded until all that remained was a shadow the size of a person—mine.

My classmates didn't cheer or jump for joy. They simply stared, aghast, at the spot where the gigantic minotaur had previously stood. The commander and his knights let out a collective sigh of relief, glad to know the deed was finally done.

"Man, I wanna go home," I muttered to myself, before concealing my presence once again. I didn't want to have to deal with my classmates' probing questions. I didn't like them looking at me like I was some sort of freak either. Sensing my displeasure, Commander Saran flashed an awkward, consoling smile in my direction before clapping his hands twice and snapping my classmates back to their senses.

"We've taken care of the biggest threat, but we're still in a labyrinth, people. There's no telling what we might run into on our way out. Stay on your guard," said the commander.

One of the knights picked up the minotaur's severed head, and two of the hero's friends helped him out of the dungeon. I walked a safe distance behind, thinking over everything that had happened.

I couldn't very well hide my true abilities now. I was sure the knights and my classmates would spread the word about what had

happened in the labyrinth, even if they had no ill intentions. The thing that concerned me was how much would get back to the king.

Once we broke the hero's curse, I thought it might be a good idea for me to disappear for a little while.

We slowly made our way back to ground level, letting the knights take care of any riffraff along the way. The sun had already gone down, and the large crowd of people that had gathered outside the labyrinth had almost completely dispersed. It seemed no one felt like being around a monster-infested dungeon at this hour.

"We'll be heading into the forest now. Try to stick together," yelled the commander.

This startled me. It had been rather quiet up to this point, the only sound being the exhausted grumblings of my fellow classmates. To be fair, I was pretty spent myself—especially after they'd rushed through the upper floors, triggering all sorts of traps, leaving me to pick up after them. After that battle with the minotaur, I was so drained I could barely use my throwing knives to pick off stragglers. That single use of Shadow Magic had almost completely drained my MP, though I *had* used a mana potion to recover a little bit afterward.

I hadn't suffered any major injuries, but I had taken quite a few cuts and scrapes, so I couldn't rightly say I'd made it out unscathed. Probably my worst injury was a little stab in the side from one of the monkey monsters with blades for hands. I'd deserved it, though—I'd been mocking it internally, wondering how you could possibly live your whole life with knife-hands, and that's when it shanked me. I quickly stopped the bleeding with a healing potion, but it still hurt like nobody's business. And while the potion had stopped the bleeding, it hadn't actually restored my lost blood, so I was left feeling dizzy for a little while. If I hadn't remembered to use the potion when I had, I probably would've passed out. Even just thinking back on it made me feel faint, so I tried to focus on something else, but we were just walking in a circle of knights at the moment, so, unfortunately, there wasn't much to do.

Though I could check to see how much my stats went up, I suppose. I did technically make the finishing blow on that minotaur, so I must've leveled up at least a little bit. Well, I know it's not quite as simple as just "leveling up" in this world, but you know what I mean.

“Status,” I whispered, and opened my stat page. Come to think of it, this was the first time I’d checked my stats since first arriving in Morrigan.

AKIRA ODA

RACE: *Human*

CLASS: *Assassin (Lv. 15)*

HP: *25/5400*

MP: *12/2100*

ATTACK: *3600*

DEFENSE: *2400*

SKILLS:

Mathematics (Lv. 5)

Negotiation (Lv. 5)

Assassin Tools (Lv. 5)

Assassination (Lv. 4)

Curved Swords (Lv. 1)

Short Swords (Lv. 5)

Conceal Presence (Lv. MAX)

Detect Presence (Lv. 4)

Detect Danger (Lv. 3)

Intimidate (Lv. 1)

Roar (Lv. 1)

EXTRA SKILLS:

Understand Languages

World Eyes (Lv. 1)

Shadow Magic (Lv. 3)

“Whoa...”

“Hm? What’s up, Akira?” asked one of my classmates.

“Er, nothing, sorry. Don’t mind me.”

I hadn’t meant to react audibly, and in retrospect, I shouldn’t have been so surprised by the fact I was already Level 15. That minotaur had to have been at a far higher level than any of us, so it was no wonder I’d gained more than ten levels from slaying it. Some of my skills had gone up a few levels as well, and I’d even gained a couple of new ones—Intimidate and Roar. I must’ve learned them from the minotaur using them on us over and over. The commander *had* mentioned it was possible to learn enemy skills you’d been hit with repeatedly. I surmised the hero had probably learned them, too, since he was the one who’d been shielding the others from the minotaur before I got there. Furthermore, my basic stats, like Attack and Defense, had tripled.

Damn. I dunno if there’s a set growth rate per level, or if it just gives you a major boost every five levels or something arbitrary like that, but it sure seems like a generous leveling system.

If my other classmates leveled up this fast, we really would be an unstoppable team. Assuming the old geezer who greeted us on day one was to be believed, ordinarily, the highest Attack stat the human denizens of Morrigan could achieve was a mere 500. Mine was already more than seven times that. When you considered that I’d started above 500 and had barely put a dent in that minotaur, you had to wonder if the people of this world could ever take down a beast like that on their own. If anything, the monsters were a little overpowered. Even Commander Saran, humanity’s so-called “Last Bastion,” hadn’t landed a single effective hit until he used Lightning’s Flash, and the dagger I’d stolen from the armory had shattered to pieces against its hide. If the average minotaur was that strong, I didn’t even want to think about how powerful the Demon Lord had to be.

“All right, everyone,” said the commander, “we’ve made it back safe and sound. Let’s just do a quick roll call to make sure we’re all accounted for, and then you’ll be free to go.”

There were still a lot of skills I hadn’t gotten the chance to try out, and I had a lot of questions for the commander as well. I’d also need to “borrow” a new weapon for myself at some point. But right then, all I wanted to do was go back to my room and collapse into my warm, soft bed.

“Oh, except for you, Akira. I need to speak with you for a bit.”

For the first time ever, I felt like I could have killed the

commander.

We agreed to meet in the courtyard a few hours later—though there were, of course, no swallowtail-esque butterflies fluttering around at that point.

“I wanted to give you this,” he began, holding out a sheathed blade in both hands.

Wait. Where did he pull that thing from? It looked like he’d whipped it out from within his clothes, but the commander’s armor was extremely form-fitting, and I couldn’t imagine there was room for an entire sword in there. But before I had a chance to ask, he eagerly foisted the sword into my hands.

“What’s this?” I asked. It looked like an entirely black katana—a twelve-year-old edgelord’s wet dream. I was surprised to see that this world had katanas, as I hadn’t seen one up to this point.

“This sword was forged by the Hero of Legend’s very own hands. He called it a ‘katana.’ I assumed it might be familiar to you, given that you both came from the same world.”

“I mean, yeah, it is, but why are you giving this to me? Shouldn’t this go to the hero instead? And is it even really yours to give out in the first place?” I unsheathed it just a bit and saw that the blade itself was also black. This Hero of Legend guy must’ve had good taste.

“I did consider giving it to Tsukasa, but he doesn’t have the Curved Swords skill like you do. Not to mention, there’s already a holy sword that gets passed down from hero to hero. I spoke with Gilles about it, and we agreed this one should go to you.”

“Does the king know about this?”

“Well, just between you and me...I may have taken it from the castle treasury without his permission. But it’s perfect timing, no? What with your dagger breaking during the battle today.”

I couldn’t believe how casual he was being about this. Had he really just admitted to stealing from the castle treasury?

“Yes, you heard right. I stole it. I’m sure the Hero of Legend would have preferred for the sword to actually see some use, rather than to stay buried under a pile of gold for eternity. Besides, you stole that silver dagger from the armory, too, didn’t you? You’ve no room to

judge.”

Friggin’ mind reader. I drew the blade all the way out of its sheath. It was forged in the Kogarasu style, with a symmetrical, double-edged tip. I remembered reading you needed to always stay on your toes against blades like these, since even a backhanded swing could carve you into pieces, unlike a traditional katana. I gave the sword a quick once-over, then asked the first question that came to mind.

“Is there no inscription on it?”

“There is. Down near the hilt, see? Not that I could tell you what it says.”

There were indeed some kanji engraved near the base of the blade itself. *Guess the first hero really was Japanese. Man, I haven’t seen anything written in my own language in a month. It’s almost enough to make me homesick.*

The engraving was painted over in white, and stood out against the black blade, yet I’d somehow missed it.

“So? What does it say?” asked the commander eagerly.

“It says ‘Yato-no-Kami,’ or ‘God of the Night Blade,’ I guess. Pretty sure they’re some sort of regional deity, though I can’t remember where from.”

“Interesting... And these sorts of minor deities are relatively common in your world?”

“Well, in my country, at least. I was born in Japan, and traditional Japanese folklore basically says that there are gods out there for anything and everything—even inanimate objects. We’ve got so many gods, it’d make your head spin.”

“A specific god for each and every individual thing... Fascinating. I’d never even considered such a concept. Here, we only really worship the Creator, you see.” The commander’s eyes were alight with the new information, and as he proceeded to launch into another lecture about his own world’s theology, I took another look down at the sword.

“Hm?” I noticed that there was another, colorless inscription alongside the one in white. I held the sword up at an angle so it became legible in the moonlight:

I pray this blade finds its way to you, my successor. May it guide you in your hour of need.

As I read the slightly skewed inscription, I couldn't help but crack a smile. I closed my eyes in a silent expression of gratitude to my predecessor. His words had indeed come as a great reassurance to me at a time when there were precious few people I could trust.

"Wish I could have met him," I mused, gazing up at the vast starry sky. There wasn't a cloud in sight, nor any light pollution like there was back in Japan. After a minute, the commander joined me in looking up at the unfamiliar constellations. It felt like all of the stress I'd built up over the past month—all my frustrations with that idiot hero and his incompetent companions, and all my anxieties about what the royal family might be scheming—washed away in an instant.

"Hey, Commander? I have a favor to ask."

It was a dark and moonless night. In Japan, the neon lights of the city would still be illuminated at this hour, but here in the castle, there wasn't a single light to pierce the darkness. From the rooftops, you could see the lights elsewhere in the capital, but from ground level, it was pitch-black. Nights like these belonged to me. The perfect storm for an assassin.

"May the hero ever embody his title, both in words and in deeds... Let damnation rain down upon any that would stand in his way..." the princess chanted, waving her hands in slow circles over a jagged black crystal.

"Aha. So that's how you've been putting your little curses on him, huh?"

The princess shuddered, then turned to look at me as I stepped down from the windowsill into her private chambers.

"Well, well. I take it you're a member of the hero's company, then? Rather rude of you to be sneaking into a pure maiden's room without permission, don't you think? Especially at this time of night. Most burglars would at least have the decency to cover their face. You must be quite bold to think you'll get away with this."

"A 'pure maiden'? Don't make me laugh. I literally just caught you

in the act of hexing the hero, you freaking psychopath. Or are you gonna tell me that was just an innocent little prayer? And no, I'm not wearing a mask. I want you to know who I am, since apparently my Conceal Presence skill works so well you didn't even know I was here. So yeah, take a good look. This is the face of the guy who knows all about your little plan—and the one who could slit your throat whenever he wanted. Go ahead and try me.”

I walked over to her with a smirk and snatched the black crystal out from under her fingertips. As I expected, merely touching the cursed crystal was enough to send a wicked chill down my spine. If this thing was exerting its evil influence over our intrepid hero twenty-four seven, then I wasn't sure whether he was impressive for holding onto some sanity or pathetic for not noticing it yet.

Either way, Commander Saran was right on the money about her. Keeping my eyes locked firmly on the princess, I thought back on our conversation from earlier.

“So you think the *princess* put that curse on the hero?”

The day after we barely made it out of the labyrinth, I asked the commander to tell me about his little hunch regarding the cause of the hero's curse. We sat side by side in the shadow of the water fountain, gazing wistfully at the butterflies fluttering in the flower beds of the same courtyard where he'd given me that sword.

“Yes... Or more specifically, I can't think of anyone it could be *but* her.”

“Doesn't she have the hots for him, though? Why would she curse the guy she's in love with?” Even an outsider like me could tell the princess was totally head over heels for the hero—probably even more so than the little fan club among our classmates.

“I can't claim to know what goes through any woman's mind, let alone hers. Perhaps it is an expression of her love, albeit a twisted one.”

“Twisted is right. That curse could've got him killed yesterday.”

It was like there were two distinct personalities clashing inside the hero's head, to the point that it nearly tore him apart. Ueno was still casting *Dispel* on him a day after the fact. Her impact was pretty minimal, but mitigating the curse's effects was our only option until we

could find and kill the caster. A few of my classmates were convinced that me forcing Ueno to use *Dispel* on him was making things worse, but I was pretty sure the curse would've gotten way stronger if we hadn't. This was no ordinary spell, after all.

"Her Highness Maria Rose Retice never knew much love or affection in her childhood. Her mother died tragically when she was very young, and I don't think His Majesty ever forgave the princess for being the underlying cause of his beloved's death. He treated her like nothing more than a pawn whose only purpose was to carry on his lineage."

Come to think of it, I had noticed an awkward air between the two the night I snuck into the king's private study.

"So? You think that, because the princess was raised to only know love as a measure of how useful someone can be, she used the curse to mold the hero into someone who could do her bidding? And in the process receive her father's 'love' for carrying out his wishes?"

"I think that's more than likely, yes."

"Interesting... I think I understand why your knights always seem a little on edge around her, then. And why the royal family remains in power despite the clear need to overthrow them."

The knights could attempt a coup, but they feared the princess's magic, which she was probably also using to conceal any damning evidence against the crown. Thus, the knights just kept their mouths shut. The royal family also seemed to be something of a sore subject for the knights. This was merely conjecture, and I wouldn't dare to ask the commander directly, but I suspected that maybe the knights had had a hand in the queen's death, whether directly or indirectly. If that was the case, then their silent obedience made a lot more sense.

"I'd say it's likely. We do feel we owe a debt to the royal family," said the commander.

Freaking mind reader.

"And furthermore, I should note that this country is quite far removed from the land of Volcano, where the demons dwell. There really is no urgent need for us to be summoning heroes like yourselves. I can't claim to know what the royal family is planning, but you'd think they'd at least wait until the demons have sufficiently harmed some of our neighboring countries before taking such measures."

Yet here we were, summoned to Retice to kill the Demon Lord. I hadn't heard a single report of any casualties in countries closer to demon territory either. Even assuming it was being suppressed for reasons of propaganda, surely if that were the case, the commander would have leaked at least a little bit of that intel to me by now. The only rational conclusion was that, from the start, we'd been summoned here for aggressive militaristic purposes.

"Their thought process is fairly simple. They think we can deal them a decisive blow if we can take out the demons' leader and be done with it. Hence why they're probably not all that worried about being caught in a lie, since they can still claim noble intent."

"I see... Well, it sounds like we should probably try to handle this tonight, then."

"Given Tsukasa's current condition, I'd say time is of the essence, yes. The princess is probably using some sort of crystal or mana stone as a medium. If you can destroy that, it should break the curse. And if you can't... Well, let's just say our little hero will soon be reduced to nothing more than a husk for the princess's wicked designs. So no pressure!"

"Got it. Then I'll plan to sneak into her bedchambers at night and break the curse. But if I manage to pull this off, I want you to get me those things I asked for yesterday."

"That seems reasonable. I'll certainly consider it."

As I finished reminiscing about the previous day, I drew my newly acquired katana and cut the black crystal in half.

"There. That ought to take care of your little curse," I said. "Sorry to bother you." I jumped back onto the windowsill, taking the upper half of the crystal along with me. I'd left my face exposed to intimidate the princess, but I didn't want anyone else to catch me in the act. I needed to get the hell out of there.

"I see. I hoped simply controlling the hero would get the others to fall in line, but it appears I was mistaken. You won't mind if I just curse them instead?" She indicated a hutch with shelves upon shelves of smaller crystals, each with a little name plate attached.

"Yeah, I bet you'd like me to stay here and break each and every

one of those things. Bet that'd give your attendants in the next room plenty of time to rush in here and capture me. No thanks—I think I'll be on my way. Oh, but before I go, just one quick question for you... Why exactly are you going along with daddy's orders here? You don't really expect him to love you more for it, do you?"

The princess stared at me with lifeless, doll-like eyes.

"Everything I do, I do for His Majesty," she whispered, monotone.

"That's dumb, but all right."

Sufficiently creeped out, I jumped out the window. *Psycho chicks, man. I can't stand 'em.*

Having successfully broken the princess's curse, I stole away to Commander Saran's private quarters. I found the commander at his desk, scribbling like his life depended on it.

"Oh, Akira. That was awfully fast," he said without looking up from his writing. That he noticed me despite my presence being concealed—and without looking at me—made me feel like a sorry excuse for an assassin. I trudged over to him and dumped the crystal on the desk, at which point he finally looked up from his work. "Oh, come now, don't be like that. Who else would I be expecting at this hour? Especially when Gilles has already gone off to bed."

"Look, I'm just annoyed that you sensed my presence so easily, okay?" I said, pouting.

"Can you blame me? There's nothing I look forward to more than our little late-night trysts."

"Ugh. Don't call them that."

The commander collapsed on his desk for comedic effect, then quickly sat back up and examined the crystal. His eyes immediately narrowed, his expression grim.

"Wait. But this is—no, it can't be..." he said, before muttering something inaudibly.

"Sorry, what's going on?" I tilted my head. "Is the curse still there, or...?"

"No, the curse is broken. I just recognize this crystal, that's all," the commander said, though I could tell he was hiding something.

Never before had I seen him look so serious—or have such rage in his eyes.

“Can I...ask where exactly you recognize it from?” Instantly, the commander snapped back to his usual cheery self, though it wasn’t genuine. “Sorry, but I need to look into something first. If it really is what I think, then I’ll explain everything tomorrow.”

“Do you think this will help us break any curses she puts on my other classmates?”

“You know, it just might.”

“Well...okay then.”

“Now! Did you have any questions about this world you wanted me to answer tonight?” the commander asked with a more genuine smile.

“No, I’m good. I think I’m just gonna hit the hay. I’m beat.”

“Oh, really? Well, good night, then.”

“Night,” I responded, before exiting out the window. I was doing a lot of that lately.

I wonder if Sir Gilles would know what that was all about... Maybe I should just wait until the commander’s ready to tell me himself. I could tell he didn’t really want to talk about it, and being the loner I was, I wasn’t sure whether it would be nosy or thoughtful to go asking around about a friend’s past.

“Okay, I think it’s bedtime.”

Only Commander Saran and Sir Gilles knew which room was mine, but now that the princess knew what I looked like, it was possible she’d turn the entire castle upside down looking for me, so it was no longer safe. I gathered up my things and left the castle for a tall, sturdy-looking tree. I sprawled out on one of its massive branches and drifted off to sleep. Tomorrow the commander would tell me everything he knew, and then this would all make sense. I was sure of it.

If only I could have foreseen the tragedy I would awaken to, I would have killed the king and princess the first night in Morrigan.

“Akira! Akira, wake up!”

I awoke to find the uncursed hero shaking me roughly by the

shoulders.

“Ugh, cut it out. How’d you know I was up here, anyway?”

“Sir Gilles told me I might find you out here. I can’t believe you were actually sleeping outside... But that’s not important right now! It’s the commander! He’s in bad shape! You’ve gotta come quick!”

Urged on by the hero, I hurried to the castle courtyard where all our classmates had gathered. The king and princess were there, too, along with the knights and Vice Commander Gilles. The only notable absence was Commander Saran.

“Sir Gilles! Where’s the commander?” I asked, but he just closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. Something really *had* happened.

“Don’t play dumb,” a voice called out from behind me. I whirled around to see a few of my classmates (ones I’d always suspected had it out for me) glaring at me maliciously.

“Sorry, what?”

“He’s right over there, Akira.”

I was about ready to write this off as a bad prank when I looked over in the direction the hero was pointing and the words caught in my throat.

Commander Saran lay motionless at the king’s feet. His clothes were caked with dried blood, and a silver dagger with a green jewel embedded in its hilt was plunged deep into his chest. One glance was enough to see the man was dead.

“That’s the same dagger you were using down in the labyrinth, isn’t it? You killed the commander! Murderer!”

All my classmates now looked at me like I was a criminal. Only the hero seemed to be holding out hope that I could prove my innocence.

“Well played, princess... Looks like I fell right into your trap,” I whispered, glancing over at the royal duo. They wore solemn expressions, but I saw a twinkle of twisted delight flickering in their eyes. I couldn’t help but smirk right back at them.

“C’mon, Akira,” begged the hero. “If it wasn’t you, then you need to say so right now!”

I ignored his plea and just kept staring down at the commander’s

lifeless corpse. To be quite honest, I didn't give a rat's ass what my classmates thought of me—the hero included. But I did mourn the fact that, despite having been brought up in the world-renowned Japanese education system, none of these sheeple were capable of critical thought. Had they not noticed my dagger shattering when I tried to stab it into the minotaur's throat, or had they just forgotten?

"Well?! Don't you have anything to say for yourself?!" yelled a particularly self-righteous classmate. A fire mage, I believed. I had a hard time remembering the names and faces of my classmates, but he was one of the few I recognized, though I still had no idea what his name was. It probably wasn't worth remembering.

All I could do was sigh.

"Is *this* the thanks I get for saving your asses down in the labyrinth? Man, I'm disappointed in you guys. Weren't we supposed to be a team?"

"Shut up! I never liked your stupid mug. You probably pulled some sneaky trick down in the labyrinth too. I know you did!" This one was an archer. He and that fire mage prick had always loved getting up in my business, trying to put me down to feel better about themselves. I hadn't interacted with them much since deciding that sleeping through free periods and lunch was a better use of my time. I'd have dealt with the hero over these goons any day of the week.

As my classmates had already decided my guilt, arguing my case would be pointless, so I walked past them to the commander's corpse. It was probably just the princess's crystals turning my classmates against me. No biggie.

Neither the king nor the princess ordered the guards to apprehend me—they simply watched me carefully. Commander Saran's face was twisted in agony. I felt a stinging fury in my chest and offered a silent prayer, then slowly drew the dagger out of his chest. A little blood spurted out, darkening his already crimson clothes. His body was cold. His gentle face, once so full of life, was still. His radiant smile, never to be seen again. My classmates shrieked at the bloodstains on the dagger, as well as at the fresh blood. I silenced them with a withering glare, then turned my furious gaze to the royal duo.

"I'm getting in the way of your little plan, is that it? Well, don't worry. I'll be out of your hair before you know it."

“You must be joking. As if we’d let you escape,” said the king.

The princess, after exchanging glances with her father, walked up alongside me and whispered in my ear, “You know far too much, just like your beloved commander, and now you’ll be tried as the villain who killed our Last Bastion.”

She’d spoken quietly, intending her words only for me, but the hero, whose eyes widened, was evidently close enough to hear as well.

As she spoke, she must have given some sort of signal, as a group of unfamiliar castle guards surrounded me once she finished. Dressed all in black, I assumed they were assassins like me. They moved like professionals, and my classmates closed in with them. Sir Gilles had been dragged aside, and the hero stood back watching. I met Sir Gilles’s gaze and felt like he was trying to tell me something, but I couldn’t figure out what.

“Take him,” the king ordered, and the circle shrunk.

“Go ahead...” I whispered. “Bring out as many goons as you like. But they’re still just goons, I’m afraid.” I looked at the smug faces of my classmates, all convinced they’d won, then activated Conceal Presence.

“Wh-where’d he go?!”

“Find him! He couldn’t have gotten far!”

The entire circle cried out in disbelief as I vanished.

Huh. Guess that was the first time I used that skill in front of a live audience, wasn’t it? I leapt swiftly over their heads and dashed over to Vice Commander Gilles. He’d anticipated my plan, as he started speaking as I drew close; perhaps he’d learned how to spot me when invisible over the time we’d trained together.

“Listen, Akira,” he whispered. “Commander Saran was killed by the king’s personal assassin unit, the ‘Night Ravens.’ They’re after you too. The Commander left a letter for you in his chambers, along with some supplies you’ll need from the castle. You need to be far away from here before the king realizes what’s going on. I know you’ll be able to handle yourself no matter what happens, but be careful.”

“Thank you, Vice Commander. You be safe too.”

Sir Gilles flashed a quick smile, and I leapt onto the castle rooftops. The soldiers were still running in circles in the courtyard looking for me. My classmates all looked irritated by my escape—except

for the hero, who appeared relieved. The princess was furious; it was only a matter of time before the hero uncovered the truth about her for himself.

I snuck into the commander's room and grabbed everything he had left for me, then left the castle. Part of me couldn't believe he was dead, but I'd known deep down something like this might happen. I'd asked the commander for his assistance in helping me leave the castle for good because I'd shown my face to the princess the night I broke the curse. I knew the king would stop at nothing to find me, and that he might resort to torturing my classmates if he had to.

I knew I hadn't killed Commander Saran and that I wasn't under the princess's control. No matter what my classmates thought of me, I could at least take solace in those two facts.

I swear I'll avenge you one day, Commander. But I don't have what it takes to do so right now. I'm sorry. I tried to picture the commander's reassuring smile and realized I was already struggling to recall it. I sprinted toward the forest trail we'd taken to the labyrinth, trying desperately to wipe away the tears clouding my vision, and failing.

Intermission: Commander Saran

POV: ODA AKIRA

COMMANDER SARAN was such an eccentric—I'd never met anyone who better fit the description.

"Akira, have you seen the commander?" asked Sir Gilles, his right-hand man.

Perhaps the best word to describe Sir Gilles would be "exasperated." If only because he was more often than not trying to hunt down the wayward commander.

"Uh, I think he's supposed to be running drills with the knights, isn't he?"

"Yes, I'm aware. And yet, he's not."

Sir Gilles needed a GPS chip to keep tabs on Commander Saran. Funnily enough, the commander always appeared out of nowhere whenever I needed his help with something, like he was using some sort of skill.

"Well, if you see him, could you let him know I'm looking for him? And there's urgent paperwork he needs to attend to? Thanks, Akira," he said before trotting off.

That poor guy really has too much on his plate. He's gonna have gray hair before you know it. I wondered why these things always fell to Sir Gilles and not the commander himself. A lot more would get done if Sir Gilles were Knight Commander. Though he did seem to respect Commander Saran an awful lot, so perhaps he was happy in his position.

I mused over the dynamic duo as I snuck into the castle archives. The door was locked, of course, but with my leveled-up assassin skills—along with some handy tools—I could crack any lock short of a fingerprint scanner, and it was all thanks to the commander. He'd taught me everything from how to walk without making a sound to how

to kill a man with one blow even when unarmed. With his help, I was becoming unstoppable. The man was well worthy of the title “Saran the Sage.”

“Let’s see... I think I’ve already read all the books on this shelf up through this one...”

I consumed as much knowledge as I could each and every night, and I now knew the exact locations of specific books and documents on each shelf. The commander could probably recite any given page from memory, so I still had a long way to go.

“I think this is where I left off,” I whispered, picking up a book. “Hm. It’s pretty easy to read, but there are a few words I don’t understand.” *Oh, well. Nothing the commander can’t help me with,* I thought as I made to leave.

“Oh, that word? It means a coup d’état. That book is a sort of manifesto, you see. You’ve got quite the discerning eye, picking it out from the bunch, Akira.”

It was rather startling to suddenly hear another person’s voice in the room when you thought you were alone. The first time it happened, I’d reflexively reached for my dagger, but I’d gotten used to it. Plus, I had no dagger to speak of anymore, and I couldn’t very well go swinging my new katana around in the midst of all these priceless books. I turned around. “Sometimes I feel like you’re more cut out to be an assassin than I am, Commander.”

Commander Saran emerged, grinning, from the shadow of a bookshelf.

“Well, now! That’s quite the compliment, coming from a true-blue assassin like yourself.”

I frowned. To think *this* guy was the country’s “Last Bastion.” Why did the talented ones always have to be either too arrogant or too carefree?

“Sir Gilles was looking for you, by the way. Said there’s some urgent paperwork that needs to be done.”

“Oh, yes, I already took care of that. Gilles should be reviewing it as we speak.”

Even the commander knew when it was time to screw around and when it was time to be a responsible adult, apparently; he was great at

keeping his true self hidden. For all his eccentricities, I respected Commander Saran, and I even thought of him as a mentor.

“Gotcha... How’d you know this was some revolutionary’s manifesto?”

I wouldn’t have thought a dangerous volume that might inspire a coup would be so accessible.

The commander grinned at my inquiry, then sat down on a nearby stack of books.

“Well, the king of that author’s country loved his queen very much, you see. But one day she went into town to buy a present for her daughter’s birthday and was assailed by a group of bandits. She tragically lost her life because her personal guard failed to protect her. Heartbroken, the king roped his daughter and several other countries into a ludicrous scheme to resurrect the queen via a ritual that would cost thousands of innocent lives. That book in your hands was written by the knight commander who uncovered the dastardly plot. As for why it’s here in the castle archives, well... That’s where books go, isn’t it? Libraries are for books as forests are for trees. I thought its disguise as a cookbook was quite clever. You have quite the eagle eye.”

The commander grinned at me devilishly. I felt cold sweat break out as I realized the tale was familiar. In fact, it sounded almost identical to the story Commander Saran had told me about Morrigan’s queen.

“Nice try, but I have a feeling you had a hand in me picking up this book. You rearranged the shelves after I left last night, didn’t you?” I asked, trying to steady my trembling voice.

“Well, now that the cat’s out of the bag, I suppose I’d better bring you into our ranks, shouldn’t I? But first, we need to get through our little mission tonight.”

He was referring to my plan to sneak into the princess’s bedchambers and destroy whatever she was using to curse the hero. I suddenly realized, despite the commander’s aloof demeanor, he was a true puppet master, which was scary, intimidating, and a little mystifying.

“All right, then.”

I hadn’t uncovered his secret. He’d led me to it so I would have to

join his cause. The commander cracked a bewitching smile.

“Good. I do love a boy who follows directions.”

In that moment, I would never have believed such a brilliant and cunning man would be found dead the next morning.

Chapter 3: The Labyrinth

I*N A SECLUDED CORNER of the castle...*

“It seems we’ve managed to kill two birds with one stone.”

“Indeed. I’ll be sure to reward the Night Ravens for their service.”

“Good... Though I’m a little surprised our boy Saran went down so easily.”

“They knew it was your will, Father. Failure was not an option. You’ll be pleased to know I’ve finished applying hexes to everyone but the hero. Now we need only concoct a believable justification for going to war with the eastern realm.”

“We can simply claim we have intel that says they’re giving asylum to the knight commander’s killer. That little brat’s probably dead in a ditch by now, but I suppose you should have the Night Ravens go after him just to be safe.”

“Yes, my liege. All shall be done in accordance with Your Majesty’s grand design.”

The plan was moving right along—even if the key players didn’t know it yet.

POV: ODA AKIRA

HAVING ESCAPED THE CASTLE, I delved deep into the Great

Labyrinth of Kantinen.

“If you ever find yourself under suspicion and forced to flee the kingdom, you’ll find no better place to lay low than the depths of the labyrinth. There are endless places to hide. I’ll do my best to ensure it never comes to that, but if for whatever reason you are forced to carry on without me, go to the labyrinth and try to reach Level 100. If anyone can do it, it’s you...”

The commander’s words played over and over in my head. I kept tearing up when I thought about never seeing him again, but I shook it off. Down in the labyrinth, every second counted—every choice could be the one that got you killed. It was even more important to stay alert since I was alone, and my skills were unsuited to handling multiple enemies at once. If even low-level monsters surrounded me, I was done for.

“Phew. Okay, made it back to the fifth floor. Figured there’d be a lot of people dungeon-diving this early in the morning, but the place is deserted.” I took a moment to collect my breath after a goblin jumped out from around a corner and ambushed me. I made short work of him with my new dagger—plainer than the one that had killed Saran, but sharp enough.

With my Level 4 Detect Presence skill, I could scope out any monsters within a fifty-meter radius, assuming they didn’t have a Conceal Presence skill of their own at Level 5 or above, of course. Nothing on these early floors went above Level 3, so as long as I didn’t detect anything close by, I could assume I was safe for the time being.

Using my dagger, I opened the goblin’s chest and extracted a tiny mana stone, just like the knights had taught us to. They were much more common in bipedal monsters than quadrupedal ones—I learned as much firsthand during our last expedition—and the larger the stone, the greater its resale value. They were mainly used as casting mediums for mage classes, as magic resided deep within each stone, which casting classes could convert into pure mana. The smaller ones dropped by low-

level monsters were used in everyday life to light fires and perform other small tasks, no special skills required. Since I was probably going to be in the labyrinth for a while, stocking up was important.

“Don’t mind if I do,” I whispered, before stowing away the purple stone in the little pouch where I kept my throwing knives under my cloak. Throwing knives were always a pain to retrieve, so I only kept a few on my person at any given time. If I found myself in a pinch, I could use Shadow Magic, so I wasn’t too worried about running out—I also had the option to sneak past a group of enemies using Conceal Presence and avoid combat altogether. I might eventually run into a monster with Mystic Eyes, so I had to stay on guard, but for the most part, I could waltz right up to an enemy leader, take ’em out, and watch mayhem ensue as the rabble tried to figure out what was going on.

As I made my way down a few floors and the drop rate for mana stones increased to about 15 percent, I started using my newfound surplus of MP to cast Detect Presence constantly and help it level up quicker. Each level gained increased the effective radius of the skill, so I could tell when it had leveled up without opening my stat page.

It had only been a few days since I was last in the labyrinth, so I remembered the route fairly well and was making steady progress. Ideally, I would make it to the thirtieth floor by the end of the day, but I was brought to a dead stop when I reached the next level. My Detect Danger skill was on high alert. I vaguely recalled the commander telling me about traps that would only activate if they sensed mana nearby, so on a whim, I took a single mana stone and tossed it on the floor in front of me. The moment it hit the ground, the floor was pelted with arrows.

“Yikes... A little early for an instant-death trap like that, don’t you think?”

They might not have been poison arrows aimed at vital organs, but it was still a lethal trap, and it definitely hadn’t been here last time. Even assuming the labyrinth could add and remove traps at will (like in some novels I’d read), the arrow trap screamed “intentional setup.”

I proceeded the rest of the way down to the thirtieth floor without stopping to rest. I ran into seven monster dens (large rooms with dozens of monsters) and stumbled upon twenty more simple traps that shot single arrows or basic spells. I managed to evade them all, and I even began to seek them out in order to level up Detect Danger. I also came across a few parties of adventurers but made sure to keep myself

concealed until they were long gone.

“All right,” I said, stopping in the room where we’d felled the minotaur. “From here on out, it’s uncharted territory for me.” Only the dim yellow light of the lanterns lining the walls illuminated the darkness. The room was about thirty feet tall, and the minotaur had been roughly half that. My heart raced and I shuddered both in fear and anticipation at the thought of having to fight something bigger. *Guess I’m a sucker for the thrill of adventure, just like most teenage boys.*

The supplies I brought with me, procured by the late commander, were enough to last about a month, but, other than a little bread when I needed carbs, I ate mostly monster meat to prepare myself for when my supplies inevitably ran out. Monster meat was a lot tastier than I expected—far better than beef, chicken, or pork—but the idea of eating humanoid monsters like goblins repulsed me. I was nevertheless sure I’d develop a taste for it if it was the only thing between me and starvation. *We humans are adaptable like that.*

“Welp, better get going.”

Belly full, I extinguished my fire and ventured on.

Down where the sunlight didn’t reach, it was hard to clock the passage of time, but I assumed it had been about ten days since I entered the labyrinth; the only clock I had was my stomach, and I’d eaten thirty meals. I’d descended thirty additional floors in that time and was now arriving at the sixtieth.

Every ten floors, there was a boss encounter. I’d conquered five thus far, none of them walks in the park, and I was standing in front of the towering door that would lead me to the next boss.

The previous bosses had been:

FLOOR 10 - Goblin General

FLOOR 20 - Orc

FLOOR 30 - Red Wolf

FLOOR 40 - Goblin King

FLOOR 50 - Fenrir

I’d fought the Orc and Goblin General on the previous visit to the labyrinth, so I knew their weaknesses and had dispatched them easily,

though it was tougher without a full party.

The Red Wolf was a massive canine with bright red fur that, predictably, used fire magic. It was the first monster in the labyrinth capable of using magic, but thanks to Detect Danger, I could dodge attacks with ease; I would have been burned to a crisp without it. I was trying to avoid using Conceal Presence unless necessary so I could level up my other skills, but the beast was too powerful to tackle head-on, so I caved. Hidden from sight, I snuck up behind it, using Assassination to hide my scent, and slit its throat. While sneaking around and attacking from behind was expected of an assassin, it felt a bit like cheating, so I tried to face monsters head-on when I could.

The Goblin King was a big fat goblin, astonishingly nimble for his size. As the name suggested, he had a posse of goblin goons on his side, so it was tough to handle them all by myself. I picked off the king as quickly as I could, then used Shadow Magic to swallow up all the little guys.

And then there was Fenrir. He felt like the labyrinth's first true difficulty spike. Sure, the other bosses had been tough to beat, but it was still possible to handle them solo. That didn't hold true for Fenrir—especially since he had *four* Red Wolves to back him up. I'd had to contend with five boss-level monsters alone. Fenrir was also the first monster I encountered who didn't feel like a mindless beast. It wasn't just a tough fight—I nearly died multiple times. I had no choice but to use Conceal Presence and slit each wolf's throat, but I knew I was going to need to come up with a better game plan going forward. What if the next boss could seal off my magic and skills, and I had to fight with nothing more than brute strength? I'd be dead meat.

From the fifty-first floor through the fifty-ninth, I decided I wouldn't use any skills or Shadow Magic in combat. I quickly learned to recognize traps on sight, even as they became more and more dangerous, and I kept using and leveling Detect Danger. Running into adventurers so far down was unlikely, but it still helped to smoke out enemy ambushes.

I'd fought tooth and nail to get here, so I was a bit nervous to find out what kind of boss I had to face next. I placed a hand on the massive door and opened it effortlessly. I stepped tentatively into the arena, the door slammed shut behind me on its own, and the lanterns lining the walls lit up, illuminating the room with their crimson glow.

All the boss arenas thus far had been similar—a circular arena about six hundred feet in diameter, with only two doors. The door that led you in closed and locked behind you, and the door that led out only opened when the boss was slain. There was no escape; you either killed the boss, or it killed you.

I squinted and looked toward the center of the arena, where my deadly foe waited.

“A Chimera?”

I couldn’t remember what the traditional chimera from Greek mythology was supposed to look like, but the beast before me had the head and front paws of a lion, the body, back legs, and horns of a goat, and a serpent for a tail. It stood about fifteen feet tall, which was intimidating, but I was just grateful to have another one-on-one encounter after the last two bosses. I drew my black katana from its sheath and braced myself for the monster’s imminent charge.

The beast let out a bellow that shook the entire arena and made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. The monster was using a one-two punch of Roar and Intimidate in an attempt to reduce my strength and morale, a show of force that would have killed the average human. The minotaur had used this skill combo as well, but the Chimera’s roar made the minotaur’s sound like a pathetic whinny. I recoiled, and that was all the time the Chimera needed to close the gap between us. The beast gnashed at me with fangs the length of my arms, and I only narrowly avoided the bite.

“All right, big guy. How am I gonna deal with you?”

This thing meant business. Even if it was technically a one-on-one fight, it could easily turn into a two-on-one if I didn’t keep a close eye on the monster’s tail.

This is what I get for complaining about bosses with minions, isn’t it?

“Uh-oh!” I cried, leaping backward just before the aforementioned tail spat acidic venom where I’d been standing. I did another backstep as the beast followed up with a few quick swipes of its claws.

“Yikes. Thank god for Detect Danger... Better keep my distance from now on.”

I now knew the tail could spit its venom about six to nine feet, so I made a point of trying to stay at least ten feet away from the Chimera

at all times. I hardly had a chance to size up the beast before it came lunging at me again. This time, I leapt not backward but forward—with my katana held firmly in my grasp.

“Groagh?!” the beast wailed in surprise.

“Ugh, seriously? Not again...” I groaned. Apparently, not even the fabled Yato-no-Kami was enough to scratch the beast’s hide. I tried again, hoping to chop off its tail at least, but the blade bounced right off. *What is with this place and having furry beasts with rock-hard skin?* It defied the laws of nature.

Carried by the momentum of my previous strike, I dashed away, then whirled around. We were now about fifteen feet apart—though for a nimble assassin and a pouncing predator, that was no distance at all. We both crouched low, then clashed once more.

“Rugh!”

There was no way I could defeat the beast in a contest of brute force; it didn’t take much strength to slit throats, assuming the throat in question wasn’t protected by skin harder than your average diamond.

Again, my blade bounced off the Chimera’s thick hide, and the beast gave chase as I retreated. I twisted my body to dodge its swipe, but I fell to the ground. I tried to roll away, but before I could stand, the beast slammed its massive paw down on my stomach. It launched me into the air, then drove me straight into the nearby wall.

Everything went white.

I was no match for this beast. Now that it had me in its clutches, I was like a stuffed animal at the mercy of a feral hound. *At least its paws are nice and soft.* For some reason, the Chimera hadn’t extended its claws, so my body wasn’t being torn to pieces. I’d only broken a few ribs—one of which felt like it was stabbing directly into my heart. Blood poured from my torso and mouth, and I knew if I didn’t heal up soon, I was a goner.

As I gazed at my wounds with indifference, I realized this hadn’t been the time or place to try duking it out with my sword alone. I mentally rebuked myself for putting theatrical heroism over safety. *Why was I being so stubborn?* I wondered as the beast lifted me and threw me across the arena.

“Argh! All right...all right. You wanna play hardball, big guy? We

can play hardball.”

The Chimera watched curiously as I rose to my feet, listening as I spoke. Then, as I raised my hand, it recoiled.

Heh. Those are some quick reflexes, buddy. But not quick enough.

“Shadow Magic, activate.”

Shadows spiraled violently through the arena, almost as if they were happy to be summoned again after sitting on the bench for so long. They wrapped around the Chimera’s legs and started dragging it down. I hadn’t even told them to do that yet.

The words Commander Saran had spoken the day I lost control of my magic and nearly wiped out a forest reverberated through my mind: *“It’s just as I thought. Your magic has a mind of its own.”*

“You think my magic...can think for itself?”

“I do. Especially since there’s no such thing as Shadow Magic in this world.”

My jaw dropped.

“Sorry, what? But it says it right there on my stat page! Shadow Magic!”

“I don’t doubt you. I witnessed it firsthand today.”

From the commander’s ear-to-ear grin, it was plain to see he was enjoying this conversation; must have been the joy of learning something new.

“At first, it may seem like there’s no rhyme or reason to the magic of this world, but it actually adheres to a very strict elemental system,” he said, flipping over one of the documents on his desk to draw a diagram. “First, we have the four main elements: fire, water, earth, and wind. These appear as ordinary skills and are perfectly useful in their own right, but they’re the most common and easiest to learn.”

He drew four circles on the sheet of paper, scribbling an element in each. Then, he drew little lines around the circles, each ending in a smaller circle. It reminded me a bit of ecosystem charts from Biology class.

“But now, let’s take a look at my Light Magic, for example. It would go right here, two degrees removed from Water Magic. What do you think comes between Light Magic and Water Magic?”

“Uh, Healing Magic, I guess?”

“That’s correct. My, you’re a quick learner.” He grinned, placing a new circle labeled “Healing” in between the ones for Water and Light. “And we can go even further than that, from Healing Magic to Disenchantment, but both schools still trace their roots back to Water Magic at the end of the day. Just like Dark Magic is an offshoot of Earth Magic and Thunder Magic is an offshoot of Light Magic. Like so.”

The commander continued drawing new circles for the different schools of magic, but there was still no place for Shadow Magic.

I asked the first question that came to mind.

“Wouldn’t Shadow Magic be an offshoot of Dark Magic? The two sound extremely similar.”

“An excellent question. As a practitioner yourself, I’m sure you’re aware that Shadow Magic generally deals physical damage where Dark Magic deals mental damage—which might make you question why Dark Magic is an offshoot of Earth Magic, but that’s just the way it is.”

“So you’re basically saying I shouldn’t question it? All right.”

“Trust me—I’ve lived in this world all my life, and there are still plenty of things that don’t make sense to me. This is just meant to give you a rough idea,” he said, adding a little circle for Shadow Magic off to the side of the diagram. “I suspect Shadow Magic’s strangeness has something to do with it being an Extra Skill.” He looked at me with a glimmer in his eyes, like a researcher who’d just witnessed his lab rat do something that would rock the very foundations of the scientific community.

“Since our little combo attack nearly razed an entire forest, maybe I should just refrain from using it altogether.”

“I’ll admit, I’ve half a mind to forbid you from ever using it again. Though the curious side of me wants to see what it can *really* do if you keep working at it.”

“Whatever you say. Now what’s this about it having a mind of its own?” I asked, eager to get back to the topic at hand.

Commander Saran dropped his pen and clapped his hands together.

“Right! Well, when you almost took out that forest today, it certainly looked from my perspective like you’d lost control of your

magic.”

“I sure did.”

“And to be clear, it’s not as though other casters *don’t* have similar accidents, but such things are usually a result of *their own* misjudgment. Do you understand?”

I frowned, unsure I really had a handle on how magic worked.

“But that spell you cast earlier not only put that forest and your life in danger, it seemed to be doing so of its own volition. I spoke to Gilles about it, and he agrees.”

“Oh, really? Well, if *Sir Gilles* says so, I guess it must be true.”

“Why must you wound me so?! I think I just felt a crack in my poor glass heart!”

“Must be tempered glass, ’cause you and I both know little digs like that don’t actually hurt your feelings. You’re just faking it for comedic effect.”

“Wait—*tempered* glass? Is that something you have in your world too?! P-please, you have to tell me about it sometime!”

The commander leaned in close to me and I quickly pushed him away. He was panting like a dog in heat, and it was kind of creeping me out. *Sorry, buddy. You might be a pretty boy, but I’m not that easy.*

“Let’s say my magic does have a mind of its own. What does that mean for me?”

“Good question. I suppose it means that if you lose control of it again while other people are around, it may very well put them in danger. It appears that Shadow Magic, though undeniably powerful, has its drawbacks when it comes to MP consumption and control,” the commander said as he regained his composure. I had to admire how quickly this guy could change tack. “Akira, I’d appreciate it if you only used this magic when I give you explicit permission to, or when nobody else is around. Even if you think you’ve got it under your control, we can never be too careful. Do I make myself clear?”

“Crystal.”

Remembering the commander’s warning, I placed my hands on my hips and surveyed the arena.

“Welp, it sure looks like the coast is clear.”

The shadows were already stretching their way up the Chimera’s legs, eagerly awaiting my command. The Chimera struggled to wriggle free, but it was no use. Its shadow was already connected to mine and, as long as there was a flicker of light, you couldn’t escape your shadow.

“Okay, guys. Tear him to shreds.”

If the shadows could speak, they would have cheered. Soon, the Chimera’s entire body was enveloped in shadow and I heard the beast cry out in agony. But nothing could stop the shadows at this point. They ripped the beast apart like bloodthirsty monsters, just as I had commanded, gnawing and gnashing at its impenetrable hide until its entrails were scattered all across the floor.

The stench of blood filled the arena, but I didn’t mind it—it was almost as if I’d been smelling it my entire life. Or maybe my senses were dulled by the immense pain I was suffering. A moment later, nothing was left of the Chimera except for indistinguishable bits. Their hunger sated, the shadows returned to my side.

“Good work, fellas. Thanks for the help,” I said, to which the shadows responded by curling around my legs before disappearing. “I don’t think I’ll ever do a challenge run against a boss like that ever again. These things are too much, man.”

Utterly exhausted, I leaned back against the wall and, the pain finally too much for my body and mind to bear, passed out.

A strange mechanical voice spoke from my lips and echoed in the empty boss arena: *“MASTER’S INJURIES HAVE EXCEEDED ACCEPTABLE PARAMETERS. AUTO-ENGAGING SHADOW MAGIC, RECOVERY MODE... MASTER’S MP SUPPLY DEEMED INSUFFICIENT. RECOVERY WILL REQUIRE THE USE OF EMERGENCY MANA STORES. INITIATING RECOVERY... RECOVERY COMPLETE. DISENGAGING SHADOW MAGIC.”*

But no one was around to hear it, so no one would ever know.

POV: SATOU TSUKASA

I TOOK A DEEP BREATH, then exhaled slowly. Before me lay the grave of Commander Saran. He had taught us how to fight and saved our butts down in the labyrinth more times than I could count, but somehow his grave already look neglected. I knew grass grew quicker in this world, but I couldn't believe how overgrown it was after a few short days.

"Looks like I'm the only one still coming to visit you, huh?"

The flowers my classmates had left on the day he was buried were wilted, their petals scattered to the wind; the ones I'd left had withered right alongside them. It had only been ten days since then, and it made me sad to think everyone else had forgotten him.

Ever since Akira disappeared, my classmates had been acting strangely. They'd become cold and distant, starting fights over the most trivial of things. Students who'd been best friends started treating each other like enemies and looked at their fellow classmates with distrust. It was as if someone had ordered them to create as much discord and strife among us as they could...or they were under the curse I'd somehow escaped. I was trying to maintain good relations with them for now, but I could already feel them pushing me away.

"I don't know how I managed to regain my sanity, but I'm guessing I have you and Akira to thank," I said to the grave.

I didn't remember much of what had happened while cursed, but after it was broken, people told me that Akira, Sir Gilles, and Commander Saran had run themselves ragged looking for a cure. Sir Gilles also told me that the king and princess had been cursing me and my friends gradually, so we wouldn't notice.

At this point, I was more focused on self-preservation and saving my friends than saving the world. I knew that keeping myself alive was the best way to protect them. I'd never liked Akira much, but I realized now he'd been working to keep the others safe in my stead, and I was grateful, but I felt nothing but frustration at my own inadequacy. I was tormented by regret, wondering what I could have done differently to avoid our current situation.

The least I could do to repay the commander was keep his gravesite clean, so I picked the weeds and washed away the mud with water that had pooled around the gravestone's base. I used no magic whatsoever. Finally, I scrubbed the grave clean with a scouring brush I'd borrowed from one of the castle attendants, making sure to get every last bit of moss.

“Whew...”

I took extra care to make sure the engraving of his name was sparkling clean. I wanted to make sure no one would ever forget who this man was and what he'd done. I closed my eyes and said a silent prayer.



I was stretching out my neck, sore from leaning over the grave, when I sensed I was being watched. “Hm...?”

The brambles were thick, so I couldn’t tell exactly where they were, but I knew they were somewhere in the bushes.

“Who’s there?!”

I drew my sword and fixed my glare in the direction of the thicket.

A young girl popped out from behind a tree.

“S-sorry ’bout that. Wasn’t tryin’ to spy on ya or nothin’.”

“Oh... It’s just you, Ueno.”

Ueno Yuki, our resident disenchanter. She was the one who had spent all her mana trying to cure me in the labyrinth at Akira’s command. She was always the life of the party in our class, yet right now, she seemed uncharacteristically crestfallen.

“Nah, don’t worry about it. Sorry for pulling my sword on you. Awfully rude of me after you tried so hard to save my life.”

“S’all good. Don’t blame you for bein’ on guard, ’specially with how weird everyone else’s been actin’ lately.”

“Are you not affected by the curse...?”

I did remember her seeming different from the others. Most noticeably, she always looked straight at me while everyone else was always casting sideways glances at one another, waiting for someone to slip up.

“Whaddya mean? I’m a disenchanter, remember? ’Course I’m gonna be more resistant to curses than the rest of ya. Though I got my fair share a’ weaknesses too, lemme tell ya.” I remained on my guard, even while she was being self-deprecating. Being too trusting was exactly how the princess had tricked me before and I wasn’t about to let it happen again. Yet I couldn’t bring myself to be cruel to Ueno either. At times like these, I really hated my people-pleaser instincts.

“Well, if ya don’t believe me, I don’t blame ya. Heck, if I’m bein’ honest, I’m not even sure I can trust you, neither. Maybe yer still cursed. So why don’t we jus’ meet back here tomorrow?”

“Why?”

“I figure it’d be nice if we could team up, y’know? I know for a fact I’m not under any spell, and I wanna prove it to ya. It sucks havin’ to be suspicious of everyone all the dang time.”

I knew what that loneliness felt like all too well, having endured it over the past ten days. The only person I knew who could manage all on their own was a certain assassin. I wished I could be as unwavering as him.

“All right. We’ll meet up here tomorrow. But let’s agree to maintain a safe distance. I’m gonna have my sword on the ground nearby, just in case. Are you okay with that?”

“Sure am. Wouldn’t wanna get too close to a feller with a sword in the first place!”

At last, I saw a hint of Ueno’s trademark smile and a wave of relief washed over me. I picked what looked like a hollyhock flower from a nearby plant and set it on the commander’s grave.

“I hope you’ll watch over me, Commander... I’m gonna be the hero this country needs. I’ll change this world for the better. I swear it.”

Ueno, seemingly moved by my oath, chimed in:

“Y’know somethin’? In the language o’ flowers, hollyhock means ‘a trusting heart.’ And if that ain’t the right flower for this occasion, I dunno what is!”

“Really? ‘A trusting heart,’ huh... I’ll be sure to keep that in mind.”

I wondered where Akira was, and what he was doing right now. For whatever reason, I found myself missing that arrogant smirk of his. Here, beneath this vast blue sky, I’d finally taken that first step toward my own destiny. An incompetent hero, forever chasing after an elusive assassin.

POV: ODA AKIRA

“H_M?”

I shot awake in the sixtieth-floor boss arena. Something didn't feel right.

“My wounds... They're gone?”

Not just the major injuries I'd suffered during the Chimera fight either. I'd also lost the scars and bruises I'd gotten from training with the commander, as well as the aches and pains in my hips and back from sleeping on the cold, hard ground. My body felt good as new. Since I sensed no presence nearby, nor any trace of mana on my body, I knew my survival wasn't the work of a passing healer—not that any healing spell could instantaneously cure any and all afflictions anyway. And I had no resurrection skill, so I didn't think I'd healed myself.

Judging by my internal clock (read: stomach), only about a day had passed since the boss fight. There was no way I could've undergone a full recovery in such a short time. However, in the absence of an immediate answer, I stretched out my arms and legs and decided not to think about it anymore. If I came to learn how it had happened one day, then so be it, but I wasn't going to fret.

“All right, then. Let's have a bite of this Chimera meat and keep heading downward, I suppose.”

I skipped merrily over to the scene of the slaughter. As other monsters couldn't enter the boss arena, and there were apparently no bugs in the labyrinth, the Chimera's remains were untouched. It was hard to call it *fresh* meat, per se, but I was pretty sure it'd still be just fine to eat once cooked. I used a mana stone to light a fire and, lacking a spit or grill of any sort, proceeded to roast the meat directly over the flames. It wasn't long before a scrumptious smell wafted through the arena.

“Thank you for this meal,” I said, bringing my hands together in prayer of gratitude before digging in.

The sweet and meaty juices of the Chimera's flesh filled my mouth—it was downright delicious. I would later come to learn that the

stronger the monster, the tastier the meat, which made Chimera meat a delicacy few would ever taste. Unfortunately, there was no way I could eat it all in one sitting, nor was it worth lugging around when it would ultimately go rancid, so I shed a single tear as I exited the boss arena and left the rest behind.

“Okay, how deep should I try to make it today? ...I wonder if I shouldn’t try mapping the place out as I go?” I muttered to myself as I slashed my way through a pack of mangy monsters.

I was just now realizing I’d managed to make it to every boss arena without the help of a map. This was quite lucky, in retrospect. The labyrinth was extremely mazelike and convoluted, but I’d made it sixty floors. I didn’t think I could chalk that up to sheer dumb luck.

“Did I get some new skill without realizing it?” I opened my stat page.

AKIRA ODA

RACE: *Human*

CLASS: *Assassin (Lv. 46)*

HP: *16000/16200*

MP: *6300/6300*

ATTACK: *10800*

DEFENSE: *7200*

SKILLS:

Mathematics *(Lv. 5)*

Negotiation *(Lv. 5)*

Assassin Tools *(Lv. 7)*

Assassination *(Lv. 6)*

Curved Swords *(Lv. 7)*

Short Swords *(Lv. 5)*

Conceal Presence *(Lv. MAX)*

Detect Presence *(Lv. 7)*

Detect Danger *(Lv. 7)*

Intimidate (Lv. 4)

Roar (Lv. 1)

Dual Blades (Lv. 1)

Mana Control (Lv. 5)

EXTRA SKILLS:

Understand Languages

World Eyes (Lv. 1)

Shadow Magic (Lv. 5)

Luck

Well, would you look at that. Right there at the bottom of my stat page was a brand-new Extra Skill that fit the bill perfectly.

“Guess that must be it.”

I wished I could’ve acquired it a little sooner. Maybe then I could’ve prevented the commander’s murder, or even avoided getting summoned to this world in the first place. Imagine if I’d been lucky enough to be in the bathroom or something when the rest of my classmates got whisked away. *I could be at home playing video games without a care in the world. Well, other than my part-time jobs.*

In any event, I was quite pleased with the rate at which I was attaining new skills and levels. I just needed to keep using them as much as I could. Surely my new *Luck* skill would get me out of any sticky situations. I wondered where I’d picked it up. Maybe it was because I’d narrowly skirted death. Or maybe the big man upstairs had seen me wandering in circles through the labyrinth and taken pity on me. Either way, I was grateful to have it, and I ventured forth with newfound resolve.

“KREEEEE!”

“What the...?!”

A massive, screeching *something* appeared directly in my path. My fight-or-flight response opted for flight. I wasn’t really in the mood to get eaten, and just looking at the thing made me nauseous. It looked like a giant mass of muck and grime brought to life, and the putrid stench coming from (what I assumed to be) its gaping maw was

revolting.

“Welp, time to get the hell outta... Wait. Huh?”

As I turned on my heels to leave, my Detect Presence skill picked up something I hadn’t sensed since about the twentieth floor—*another person*. Now that my effective skill radius was up to three miles, this presence could be anywhere on the sixtieth floor, but I only sensed it when that beast opened its mouth.

“Guess it’s worth a shot...” I said, gripping my trusty katana. I didn’t like wasting my energy on monsters I couldn’t eat, but I just had to satisfy my curiosity.

“KREEEEEEEEEEE!”

“Yeugh! Would you *shut* that foul mouth already?!”

I raised my sword and cleaved the beast with a single downward slash, being careful not to harm what might be trapped within.

“K-kreee...”

The monster fell to the ground. *Pathetic*. It was far weaker than any of the other monsters prowling about on this level. It looked like a type of slime, but those were more likely to be found around the tenth floor. The beast’s oozing exterior dribbled away and dissolved into the floor.

“Mmngh...”

I sighed. *Yep. Called it.*

I sheathed my blade and approached the young woman lying on the floor where the slime had been. She was still alive—definitely breathing, albeit unconscious.

Great, just what I needed. New dead weight to carry around, I thought to myself. Resigned to my fate, I set up camp for the night.

One look at the girl and I knew she was an elf. Her face was the kind of beautiful that won international beauty pageants back home, and she even put the princess of Retice to shame. But it was those trademark pointy ears that really gave it away. She was an awfully long way from home.

Commander Saran had told me the elves hardly ever ventured beyond the bounds of the Sacred Forest, preferring to keep to themselves and watch over the Holy Tree in peace. He’d also mentioned

they were an incredibly arrogant race who lived far longer lives than humans, and they looked on humanity with disdain for our reliance on deforestation. There was no such thing as a half-elf, either. There were no recorded cases of humans and elves—or humans and beastfolk—having successfully reproduced.

Also, her clothes were made of far finer fabric than anything I'd seen the king and princess wear, so she had to be of noble blood or something.



“Man, of all the shitty luck,” I groaned. I wasn’t looking forward to having another mouth to feed, but I started cooking dinner for two all the same. “Wait a sec. Maybe I should try using World Eyes before she wakes up.”

It was the one skill I hadn’t really had a chance to try out yet, partly because I was a little afraid to find out what it did—especially after my other Extra Skill, Shadow Magic, had gone completely out of control the first time I used it. I assumed it was a skill that would give me some sort of special vision or insight, but I’d been too terrified of something going wrong to try it back at the castle.

But in the labyrinth, the only people I would be putting at risk were myself and this random elf girl I didn’t know and therefore wouldn’t mind sacrificing in the name of science... *Okay, kidding.*

But time was of the essence; she could wake up at any minute, so I calmed my mind and activated World Eyes.

“What the?!”

LABYRINTH WALL (Lv. 60): Extremely hard. Cannot be broken.

LABYRINTH WALL (Lv. 60): Extremely hard. Cannot be broken.

LABYRINTH WALL (Lv. 60): Extremely hard. Cannot be broken.

LABYRINTH WALL (Lv. 60): Extremely hard. Cannot be broken.

LABYRINTH WALL (Lv. 60): Slightly weaker than surrounding walls.

LABYRINTH WALL (Lv. 60): Extremely hard. Cannot be broken.

LABYRINTH WALL (Lv. 60): Extremely hard. Cannot be broken.

LABYRINTH WALL (Lv. 60): Extremely hard. Cannot be broken.

All at once, an entire encyclopedia's worth of information flooded my mind. I fell to my knees, clutching my head in my hands. Using the skill for even a split second had given me a headache and made me feel like I was about to throw up.

"Huff...huff...!"

When the pain finally subsided and I could open my eyes again, stat pages were floating above everything around me. World Eyes apparently gave you access to an infinite supply of information about the world around you, and while much of it looked exactly the same, there were interesting bits of intel to glean. For example, a single spot in the wall was soft enough to break through, despite looking identical to all the rest.

I deactivated World Eyes and collapsed in a heap on the floor. I'd been right to assume Extra Skills weren't the sort of things you could go around using willy-nilly. I was used to pain after practicing with the commander, but if one of my classmates were to try using World Eyes, I was pretty sure they would faint from shock. It had only lasted a second, yet it felt like I'd seen something I wasn't supposed to... I assumed the skill was meant for more practical applications, like viewing another person's stats, but I could probably see much more than that—maybe even into the future.

Not that there was any real use for such an overwhelming amount of information, especially if it ended up costing me my life. I wasn't invested enough in this world to care about its future anyway, so I would stick with Conceal Presence as my overpowered skill of choice. Maybe use World Eyes every once in a while to check a stat page or two. Nothing more.

"Wait a minute... Can I use it to see the stat pages of stat pages?"

I decided to give it a whirl and opened up my own stat page to see what it looked like. Little pop-up windows appeared over each skill, which was a bit much to handle, so I focused on the one directly above World Eyes.

World Eyes (Lv. 1): Allows the user to see anything and everything about the world around them. Active field of view can be

adjusted as desired.

“Sounds about right,” I whispered, before closing my stat page. I sighed and went back to cooking since it was getting close to dinnertime. But just as I was getting started, the girl on the floor (who I’d honestly completely forgotten about) stirred.

“Ngh... Where...am I?”

“Oh boy, here we go...” I grumbled before calling out to her. “Hey, sleepyhead. You’re not in pain or anything, are you?” I hadn’t bathed in weeks, and I probably looked pretty terrifying at the moment, so I made an effort to be as friendly as possible. The last thing I needed was her freaking out and either drawing a bunch of monsters to us or treating me like a criminal due to some stupid misunderstanding. I also wasn’t expecting her to be a saint either. Where I came from, pretty girls weren’t well-known for having personalities to match.

“Oh, um... No, I think I’m fine...”

She seemed a little out of sorts—probably because she’d only just woken up—and hardly batted an eye at my grisly appearance. In my infinite kindness, I extended a juicy leg of monster meat toward her, along with what little remained of my bread. I heard her stomach growl the moment she got a whiff of it.

Well, she’s not too stuck-up to eat monster flesh, at least. That’s a good sign.

The girl snatched the food out of my hands, then dashed off to a corner and crouched down, watching me like a feral cat.

Not bad. With moves like that, she’d make a decent assassin. Before I was even finished admiring her speed, she’d devoured all the food I’d given her and was glaring at me with a look that demanded more. I sighed and held out the other leg I’d cooked for myself.

“Th-thank you,” she grumbled hoarsely as she choked down her food.

I nodded and poured her a cup of water. It was wonderful how a single mana stone could be used for a little bit of everyday magic. The ability to make a fire or conjure water for oneself made cooking a breeze, even down in a deep labyrinth like this. I watched the girl finish the monster leg before downing the cup of water in a single gulp.

“Thank you for saving me,” she finally said, the water having cleared up her throat.

I started to feel little awkward.

“No prob. But what were you doing inside that monster anyhow?”

“I don’t know... I don’t really wanna talk about it.”

“Suit yourself, I guess.”

The conversation came to a halt. There were plenty of things I wanted to ask her, but I decided to inspect her stat page instead.

AMELIA ROSEQUARTZ

RACE: *High Elf*

CLASS: *Spirit Medium (Lv. 51)*

HP: 500/25000

MP: OVER MAX

ATTACK: 400

DEFENSE: 350

SKILLS:

Royal Grace (Lv. 4)

Spellcraft (Lv. 4)

Gravity Magic

Resurrection Magic

Curseproof

Evasion Magic

EXTRA SKILLS:

Archery (Lv. 8)

Spirit Dance

World Eyes (Lv. 3)

So not just an elf, but a High Elf, eh? Also, is this chick a hacker? Her MP is so high, it can’t even be displayed? What kind of bullshit is that? And what’s with this OP Spellcraft ability? She just gets to create new spells

whenever she wants? Not even we summoned heroes can do that. She's even got World Eyes just like me, so she's probably already read my stat page too.

"So what are you doing down here, Akira?" she asked.

See, I knew it. At least ask my name anyway, dammit. It's common courtesy. Imagine if she did that to someone who didn't know she had that skill. They'd flip.

"Just grinding skill levels," I responded.

"Gotcha."

The conversation drifted off again.

Commander Saran had told me elves generally had golden hair, but Amelia's was silvery white, and her eyes were not the common deep blue, but red. Maybe she was an albino elf. The average person might find her looks a bit off-putting, or even alarming, but luckily for her, I wasn't exactly average. I thought she was strikingly beautiful, though I knew better than to say so out loud to someone I'd just met.

"What about you? Are you lost? Trying to find your way back to elf country?"

"No, I'm never going back there. I'm sticking with you from now on."

Well that was awfully presumptuous of her. Judging from her stat page, she could probably hold her own, but I wasn't sure I was ready to have her tag along. Traveling around with a beautiful woman might draw unwanted attention, and I was supposed to be an assassin. It would be best if we went our separate ways as soon as we made it out of the labyrinth.

"No offense, but once I clear this labyrinth, I'm gonna wanna go home, once it's safe for me to do so."

"Go home' where...?"

"Huh?"

"There's no place for you in that castle anymore, nor anywhere else in this world."

"And what makes you so sure of that?"

I knew that everyone at the castle had been brainwashed, but I figured I would destroy the crystals the king and princess were hiding and break the curse, like I'd done for the hero. Then we could expose

the royal family for the evil schemers they were and I could be absolved of the murder charge. And if not, I would wait until I got stronger than the Night Ravens and force *them* to flee the castle.

“Some things I just know. But you and I have the same eyes, so you should know it to be true,” she said, pointing at her eyeballs.

“Sorry, but I don’t. If it’s World Eyes you’re talking about, then I guess my skill level’s just not high enough to do that yet.”

“It’s got nothing to do with skill level. You’re just refusing to see the truth.”

I assumed she was talking about how I’d decided I didn’t want to use the skill to see into the future. I averted my gaze. It felt like this girl could see right through me, and I couldn’t bear to look her in the eye any longer. I decided to change the subject.

“Anyway, back on topic. What exactly is your game plan now that you’re free from that disgusting monster?”

Amelia thought the question over for a moment.

“...I’ll go wherever you go, Akira.”

Still not giving up on that, huh? In her defense, she hadn’t judged me by my appearance like most other girls did, and she wasn’t an annoying chatterbox either, so she wouldn’t be the *most* obnoxious companion. I was growing too exhausted to continue the conversation in any case, so I pulled my blanket out of my bag and said,

“Okay, well... I’m gonna hit the hay.”

“Good night,” she said sweetly.

“Yeah...”

I threw my one and only blanket over to Amelia, then leaned my back against the labyrinth wall. We’d made camp at a dead end in the maze, so we weren’t likely to be ambushed in our sleep; I knew from experience that monsters only came out of the labyrinth’s walls when you activated a trap. I did, however, extend the range of my Detect Presence skill to cover Amelia as well, who was already sawing logs. Not exactly the sort of elegance I’d expect from elven royalty. Or maybe the Royal Grace skill on her stat page had nothing to do with her lineage.

I was not the least bit happy about this turn of events, but I’d

finally teamed up with my first proper traveling companion.

POV: AMELIA ROSEQUARTZ

I WAITED UNTIL AKIRA had drifted off to sleep before I opened my eyes. Royalty or not, no woman in her right mind would fall asleep in the presence of an unfamiliar man, especially not on the cold hard ground, no matter how tired they were. For better or worse, I was still a princess.

Oh, who am I kidding? “For better or worse...” As if it could possibly get any worse. I sighed. I’d already been driven out of my own homeland, and by my younger sister, no less. I had nowhere to run, and no place to call home. I may have been overly blunt in telling Akira that there was no place for him in this world anymore, but I was far more lost than him.

I turned away from Akira, afraid he might catch me staring. He seemed such a master of his senses and even a simple gaze might be enough to rouse him from his sleep. I didn’t want to disturb my savior’s rest. I wasn’t *that* inconsiderate.

Then I felt a warm breeze caress my skin. It seemed Akira had used a mana stone in his sleep to cast a little survival magic to keep the corridor at a comfortable temperature. He even extended the radius of the heat to cover me. I had to admit, despite his rude manner of speech and rough exterior, he seemed like he might be a good person at heart. I couldn’t think of anyone back in the elven domain who would be so considerate of another person, even for something so small.

I could feel my cheeks growing warm, and not from the heat. *What’s gotten into me? Surely I can’t be...blushing, can I? No, I’ve never reacted like this before—not even in response to my most dashing suitors.* I placed my cold hands on my cheeks, hoping to cool them down.

“Well, it’s far too sudden to be a fever...and I don’t feel dizzy or anything...”

My heart was racing, and my extraordinarily pale skin (even by elven standards) turned bright pink. *What is this affliction that’s come over me? Not some incurable disease, I hope. Oh, what in the world is happening to my body?*

POV: SATOU TSUKASA

A FEW HOURS had passed since I sent out a group summons, yet only about half of the twenty-seven seats in the room were filled.

Many of my fellow classmates' complexions were starting to worsen from the stress of being stuck in this world, and some were even looking quite gaunt, with dark circles beneath their eyes. The only ones who seemed right as rain were me, Ueno, and the second most powerful warrior in the group—our resident samurai class, Asahina Kyouusuke. He'd always been a man of few words though, so it was hard to say whether he was actually doing fine or just putting up a tough front. The boy was an enigma. The most I'd seen him do was nod along whenever Akira went over to his desk and started talking to him. Akira was the closest thing to a friend Kyouusuke had, at least in our class. I knew he was captain of the kendo club and was deeply respected by the other club members.

Now that I thought about it, he'd also always been in the same class as me and Akira every year. What a strange coincidence, that I'd been stuck with two men of mystery my entire educational career. Kyouusuke had only grown more mysterious since coming to Morrigan.

"Well, I can see we're not all accounted for, but that's fine. We'll start the meeting regardless." I stood up and the atmosphere in the room immediately froze over. All of my classmates were staring daggers at me.

"What could we *possibly* have to talk about, Mr. Hero?" asked Watabe Katsumi, the boy who'd set off the rat trap during our first trip down into the labyrinth.

He was a member of my retinue, and someone I had a fairly decent relationship with back in our world, but apparently that didn't count for much. I shot an equally vicious glare back at him, and that was enough to make a few other students flinch. No one in this room was stronger than me—especially now that Akira was gone, and that I was getting personal training lessons from the newly christened Knight Commander Gilles. I wasn't about to let anyone show me up. Maybe Akira could have, but I was the hero, damn it.

“We’re going to talk about our next move,” I said calmly. The twenty-seven of us had been meeting up periodically to exchange intel. During our first meeting, we’d shared our respective classes and abilities. We’d briefly discussed Akira’s as well, since by then it was no secret that he was an assassin.

“Our next move? Really?” said Sakata Natsumi, the star player of the girls’ volleyball team. In this world, she was an amazon—a female warrior class befitting her tall stature.

“C’mon, man. You know better than anyone what a sorry state our group is in. Don’t tell me you’re seriously thinking we should take on the Demon Lord or whatever.” This came from Tanaka Kaichi, #4 on our school’s baseball team and a necromancer in this world.

He and Sakata were members of my personal retinue, as their athletic abilities had paid off in the form of attack power, making them two of our strongest fighters. They were spearheading the opposition. I had to hand it to the princess—her plan was quite cunning. She was trying to destroy our group from within in an attempt to make me falter.

“That’s exactly what I’m thinking,” I said at last. “I’m gonna go out there and slay the Demon Lord, just like we promised His Majesty we would. Any of you brave enough are welcome to join me.”

A hush fell over the room. Followed closely by total anarchy.

“You’ve gotta be kidding, dude!”

“We’re all being treated like criminals because one of *our* guys killed the commander, and you think that *now* is a good time to do this?!”

“What are you, stupid?”

“I mean, he must be, right? Everyone knows it’s Oda’s fault we’re in this mess!”

“I get it now. He’s just using this as an excuse to run away!”

“Wow. Some hero you are.”

“Well, go ahead, then! Run away, you pathetic little coward!”

It always amazed me how a single naysayer could turn into an angry mob if you stood back and let things snowball. I slammed my fists on the fine marble table, taking care not to damage it. I wouldn’t want

to foot the bill for a new one just because I got carried away. I didn't leave a mark, but the impact made a powerful sound that silenced the dissidents immediately.

"Fine," I said. "Don't come with me. I didn't expect much out of you buffoons anyway." I let out a deep sigh. "I'm leaving, and I'm not coming back. Enjoy sitting around the castle bickering at each other, I guess." I started to walk away.

I *had* to leave. The king and princess would stop at nothing to get me back under their control and I wasn't going to let them have their way with me again.

"I'll come with you," said an unfamiliar voice, breaking the silence. I turned and saw Asahina Kyouzuke rising from the table.

So that's what his voice sounds like. It might have been the first time I'd heard him say more than a word or two.

Following in Asahina's footsteps, several other students who had kept quiet until now stood to join him. Among their number were Ueno the disenchanter and Hosoyama the healer. I nodded to my newfound allies and led them out of the conference room.

"Guess that makes seven of us, then. Which works out well, since that's how many we had in our previous teams."

"And with Ueno and Hosoyama on board, we won't have to worry about getting cursed or injured," said Asahina. I couldn't believe how much he was saying all of a sudden. I wasn't just taken aback—I felt like I was witnessing a miracle.

"Well, everyone," I began, after we'd put some distance between ourselves and the conference room. "At the risk of sounding pretentious, I hereby nominate myself as leader of the group. Are there any objections, or are we all in agreement?" A few members of the group nodded their heads in support, and none dissented. "Then let's gather our belongings and meet at the castle gates in an hour. We'll depart as soon as everyone's accounted for."

On my orders, the group split, and we headed to our separate rooms. Given that slaying the Demon Lord was the sacred duty entrusted to us by the king in the first place, I was fairly certain we could overrule any opposition to our departure. However, it was still

possible that they would try to thwart us indirectly. I knew Commander Gilles would have our backs, but it was imperative we make haste.

I had to wonder why Asahina had decided to come with me. For someone who was going to be one of my few trusted companions on the journey ahead, I knew frighteningly little about his true motives.

Chapter 4: A New Companion

POV: ODA AKIRA

“**W**HERE ARE YOU, Akky? Please come home soon! I promise I’ll never ask for anything again. I’ll even start helping out around the house!”

“Good grief. First your father, now your brother. Why do all the men in my life get up and leave?”

My mother and sister were searching desperately for me. I hadn’t seen their faces in weeks. My mother looked even more disheveled than I remembered and my sister’s eyes were red and swollen from crying. *Trust me, I wanna go home too. I’ll do whatever it takes to come back to you guys, I promise.*

“Oh... It was just a dream... It felt so real, though.”

“Morning, Akira. Can it be breakfast time yet?”

Hearing a weak voice beside me, I half-opened my eyes. Amelia was looking at me and clutching at her stomach with both hands.

“What are you, a serial mood-killer?”

“Did you say cereal?! Gosh, that sounds good...”

I sighed. I was a fool to expect anything more than comic relief out of this girl. I sat up and pulled out some of the bread the commander had collected for me, as well as the tightly wrapped cloth in which I kept my meat reserves.

“Were you having a nightmare...? You were tossing and turning in your sleep.”

“Nah,” I shook my head, picturing my family’s faces again. “If anything, it was the opposite.” I hadn’t seen them in over a month—of course I was homesick.

“Oh. So you were dreaming of your family back in your world or something?”

“Yeah,” I said, toasting the bread and cooking the meat. Drool was dribbling from Amelia’s mouth. *Hold your horses. It’s still raw, for cryin’ out loud... Wait a minute. I never told her I was from another world.*

“World Eyes can tell me all sorts of things. Like who you were thinking about when you touched yourself last night. You know I could’ve helped you out with that, right...?”

“Hey!” I yelped, my voice cracking. “Don’t use your special eyes on shit like that! It’s none of your business!”

“Oh, I think it’s very much my business,” Amelia responded with a devious smile. “If we ever want to be *truly* inseparable traveling companions, it’ll have to happen sooner or later.”

Amelia reached out to grab one of the rolls, but I slapped her hand away and flipped the meat.

Detect Presence suddenly alerted me to something coming closer. It seemed the smell of cooking meat had drawn a monster to our position—an anthropomorphic, pig-faced thing, Level 52. Amelia shot to her feet, but I pushed her back down, then took the beast out with a quick throwing knife.

“Wait. Did we just get even *more* meat?”

“Trust me, you won’t wanna eat that one. They taste awful.”

“Oh. Well, that’s stupid. What’s the point of meat you can’t even eat? Might as well just destroy it.” Amelia then proceeded to use her Gravity Magic to obliterate the monster’s corpse. What an absolute waste of MP. With practically infinite MP, perhaps that was standard practice. She did make a point of casting *around* my throwing knife so it wouldn’t be destroyed as well, so there was at least some thought behind her actions. However, the entire corridor was left looking like a slaughterhouse, which wasn’t exactly the most appetizing backdrop for breakfast, even if I was mostly used to gore.

“Hey, Amelia. I’ll let you have the bigger hunk of meat if you go dispose of all that shit somewhere else.”

“Be right back!”

Heh. Sucker. I grinned, then turned the meat again. *Thank god she’s agreeable.*

“Okay, I got rid of it.”

I thanked her for her services, and—being a man of my word—handed her the larger of the two hunks of meat. Her eyes immediately lit up, and I couldn’t help but smile as I pulled my hunk off the fire. Eager to dig in, I clapped my hands together and said a quick prayer, Amelia watching curiously.

“Thank you for this meal.”

“Who are you talking to? Why are you thanking them?”

“Oh, right. You guys don’t really give thanks before meals in this world, do you?”

Elven folk were always hungry for knowledge, I’d been told; they were perhaps second only to Commander Saran. Maybe that was part of the reason she wanted to tag along with me. I told her all about Japan as we ate and she devoured every last bit of trivia I offered along with her breakfast, only taking a break from chewing to ask another question.

“So, wait. You guys have *eight million* gods?”

“No, no. That’s just a figure of speech. It just means we have a lot—in traditional Shinto, we believe there are gods and spirits living inside of anything and everything.”

I remembered having a similar conversation with the commander. That had been only a few short weeks ago, but it already felt like another lifetime. I found myself wondering if the hero was doing well and whether he’d broken the curse on our other classmates or not.

“I know, Akira! Why don’t you tell me about your family?”

“Well, all right... I live in a one-parent household with my sickly mother. Her name’s Yukari, and I’ve got a little sister named Yui who’s a grade behind me.”

“What happened to your dad?”

Ah, yes. My dad. I clenched my teeth as a vision of him walking out the front door flashed through my mind.

“He left a few years ago, and my ailing mother had to raise us kids by herself.”

“Oh... I’m sorry to hear that...”

Since then, my mom had started working from home, taking on

odd jobs, and I'd been juggling multiple part-time jobs with school to help contribute to our family finances. Even Yui was working part-time, despite really wanting to take part in extracurricular activities. I was also doing all the housework and most of the cooking. My mom cooked when she could, but her health kept her from doing it every day. I hoped the two of them were still eating properly in my absence. I worried I'd make it home only to discover they'd died of food poisoning or malnutrition.

"I have a younger sister too, you know," Amelia offered.

"Wow, really? I wouldn't have pegged you for an eldest child."

"Yup. But it kinda feels the other way around, honestly. She's way prettier than me, and she's good at everything she does."

"You don't say," I responded. I sensed the conversation was about to take a depressing turn. I looked deep into Amelia's eyes, which had twinkled like the night sky at the first sign of meat but were now overcast and sullen.

"I've never been good at anything. Not cooking, not housework—nothing. But my sister, she can do anything she sets her mind to without even breaking a sweat. She's my father's perfect little princess."

"Is she obsessed with meat too?"

"No, she'll eat anything. And she's stronger than me, and she has more skills than me, and... Wait. What does meat have to do with anything?!"

I felt like I was getting a rough idea of Amelia's situation and why she got so down on herself the moment we started talking about our siblings. It sounded like her little sister was the favorite child and probably got a lot of special treatment. I also guessed Amelia was constantly being compared to her little sister, which would have affected her early childhood development and given her an inferiority complex. My sister and I had no such rift between us, so I couldn't relate. My family situation may have been unique in a lot of ways, but my mother never would have let that slide.

"Relax, I was just trying to lighten the mood. And, if it makes you feel any better, I think 'perfect' people are boring," I said. Amelia raised her head to look at me. "Like, when you're perfect, there's no room for improvement, y'know? If you ask me, it's our flaws—and how we adapt to and overcome them—that make us interesting. That's what builds

character. That's what makes us human...or elves, in your case. Anyway, I can tell you right now that if I met this 'perfect' sister of yours, I probably wouldn't like her one bit."

It was the same reason I couldn't stand the hero. He did have his fair share of flaws, but they were overshadowed by his success in other areas. He was a perfect little prince looking down on us peons from his ivory tower and it made him boring as hell.

"I see... Well, I'll make sure you never have to meet her, then."

"Thanks, I appreciate it. We'd better pack up our things and get a move on. This labyrinth isn't gonna explore itself."

Amelia's expression softened a bit, and I started feeling awkward again; consoling people was way outside of my wheelhouse. I ruffled Amelia's hair and stood up, then went off to sharpen my katana.

"Thanks," she whispered.

I pretended not to hear.

Amelia proved to be quite capable in battle. I sort of assumed that, since she was royalty, she'd start running around screaming when monsters appeared, but I quickly learned I'd underestimated her.

"Amelia! Three hostiles headed your way!"

"Yup, not a problem. Gravity!"



She flattened all three into pancakes with Gravity Magic, just as she'd done at breakfast. All that remained of the giant ratlike beasts was a single viscid pile of flesh. *Yeugh.*

"Well, they didn't look very tasty... Did I mess up? Are you mad at me?" she asked, pouting her lips and staring dejectedly down at the ground.

"What? No, of course not. I didn't even say anything."

Her face lit up in an instant.

This girl, I swear.

"What floor do you think we're on now?" she asked.

"Still sixty-two, I'm pretty sure. I was hoping we could make it to the seventieth floor today, but I don't think that's gonna happen."

"We can do it! I know we can! You and me, Akira—we're an unstoppable team!"

I had no idea where this confidence was coming from, so I just ruffled her hair again. Every time I ran my fingers through her silky locks, she immediately perked up. It also made her eyes shine and her cheeks turn bright red, but I wasn't so full of myself as to get the wrong idea about that—surely her body was just reacting to the humidity. *Yep, that must be it.*

"Have you been drinking water?"

"Uh-huh. But why do you keep reminding me to do that?"

"Because dehydration is no joke, Amelia. Granted, we're less likely to die of dehydration down here than a sudden monster ambush, but it's still something you need to be aware of."

"Dee-high-*what*-now?"

Maybe they hadn't grasped the concept of dehydration in this world yet. Medical science certainly wasn't very far along, from what I'd gathered.

"Have you ever started feeling ill on a hot day, especially after you haven't had a drink of water in a while?"

"I mean, yeah."

"That's called dehydration. It can kill you if you let it."

"There was a time when a bunch of the younger elves got sick and

died suddenly on a really hot day, but we always assumed it was some sort of epidemic or something. You're telling me that was actually this dee-high-drayshun thing? That's wild."

I could only hope she understood the importance of proper hydration. Hell, even I'd gotten careless in the past and came down with heatstroke at one of my part-time jobs. That definitely wasn't fun. My little sister bawled her eyes out at my bedside, and my mom had to do all the housework that day. I'd sworn to never take my health for granted ever again after that.

"So, yeah. Drink well and drink often, you hear me?"

"Loud and clear."

I flung a throwing knife into a monster's forehead as it rounded an upcoming corner. My assassin level and individual skill levels were coming right along. The only question now was whether I'd reach my target level before we reached the bottom of the labyrinth.

"Y'know, Akira... That world you're from? Er, that country, I mean? There's actually a country in this world I've heard of that sounds just like it. Like, uncanny levels of similar."

"Wait, for real? Was it founded by prior generations of heroes summoned here?"

"Yeah, it actually was. It's on the edge of humanity's continent, the one that faces ours, if I remember right. It's called Yamato. And they've even got that rice you keep saying you've got a hankering for."

"Welp. Guess we've figured out where we're going after we clear this labyrinth."

"I had a feeling you'd say that."

I was craving rice so bad I could've killed a man. I was sick and tired of eating nothing but stale bread and meat. Rice and miso soup were Japanese staples and if I didn't get some rice in my gullet soon, I wasn't sure I could go on living. *Rice is love. Rice is life.*

Whoops, think I got a little carried away there.

"They've even got those 'hot spring' things you were telling me about, so we could try those out, too! I guess they're normally separated into 'men's baths' and 'women's baths,' but I've heard there are plenty of 'mixed baths' we could use."

“Uh, Amelia? You *do* know what it is you’re suggesting, right?”

“What, getting naked in a pool of warm water together?”

“And you don’t have any problem with that...?”

“Oh, don’t worry—I’m quite confident of my assets.”

I let my eyes wander down to Amelia’s chest. I hadn’t paid much attention before, but she was right—those were some serious assets she was packing. I fantasized for a moment about what they might look like underneath her clothes but caught myself drooling and snapped out of it. No, it would never work. An average-looking guy like me could never hop in a mixed bath with a babe like Amelia. I wasn’t emotionally mature enough for such a feat, nor for the assuming glances we’d get from all the other clientele.

“Y-yeah, I dunno. Let me get back to you on that one,” I croaked.

“Okay. Just let me know what you decide before we leave the labyrinth, I guess.”

“I-I’ll see what I can do.”

I was suddenly praying this labyrinth would never end. We carried on, butchering our way through hordes of monsters, the awkward tension between us more palpable than ever.

“You know, you’re the first human to reach this level of the labyrinth. The deepest anyone else has ever made it was the fortieth floor, and even that took an entire raid party. You might be stronger than all the other adventurers who’ve come here combined.”

I looked up at Amelia, startled by her sudden assertion. She looked back at me earnestly. I decided to answer that earnestness by letting her in on a secret I hadn’t told anyone but the commander.

“Yeah, I don’t know why, but my stats are way, way higher than even the hero’s.”

Amelia gave a little nod, as though she’d suspected as much, but she didn’t otherwise react. When she finally did respond, her tone was measured and serious.

“Akira. The demons are the strongest of the four races, and even they generally max out at 900 attack power. The last Demon Lord barely cracked 10,000. You are undoubtedly the strongest living thing in this world right now.”

“Yeah...I suspected as much. Even before I knew about World Eyes, I could tell there was something different about me. But I made a promise to someone that I’d come down here and grind until I hit Level 100. By the time we leave this place, I expect I’ll be a bona fide one-man army.”

“What happens when you hit Level 100?”

“No clue. He didn’t say why I should level up so high, but I have a feeling something good will happen. Something I’m sure I’ll like.”

If I got this strong back home, they’d give police permission to shoot me on sight. Or maybe they’d keep me in a containment chamber to run experiments on. But one thing was for sure: People like me weren’t supposed to happen in this world. I was an abomination. Just as I thought this, Amelia grabbed my hand and squeezed it tight.

“Even if the rest of the world thinks you’re a monster, I’ll still stand by your side.”

“Thanks,” I responded, feeling just the slightest bit relieved to hear her say that. I’d had an exchange similar to this once before, though in that instance, I’d been the one doing the reassuring.

I wondered how good old Kyousuke was holding up.

POV: ASAHINA KYOUSUKE

I'D KNOWN THE HERO, Satou Tsukasa, for quite some time. He, Akira, and I had all been in the same class since kindergarten. When I first noticed the pattern back in sixth grade, I thought it little more than a bizarre coincidence, but after it continued for over a decade, I couldn't help but think it must be some sort of curse.

Satou always antagonized Akira, who never really paid him any mind. Being Akira, he never really paid *anyone* any mind. Thus, as statistical anomaly kept us bound together all the way into high school, the bad blood between them persisted. By that point, I'd accepted it as part of our shared destiny.

Akira and I didn't start speaking to one another until we were already in high school. Unlike the ever-popular Satou, he and I didn't stick out from the crowd. We never really spoke to our other classmates, instead preferring to simply take naps or read by ourselves through lunch and free periods. Then, during summer vacation of our freshman year, I stumbled over one of Akira's secrets while I was out and about.

"You're...Oda Akira, correct?"

"Hm? ...Aw, crap. You're, uhhh... That guy from the kendo club..."

"Asahina Kyoussuke, yes."

Our school's code of conduct didn't forbid taking on part-time work. They didn't encourage it, of course, but they would approve most applications so long as you had a compelling reason and your grades weren't already suffering. That said, Akira was the only person I knew who was actually doing part-time work, and he apparently didn't want anyone finding out about it; I'd just happened upon him taking a break. We simply greeted each other, then went our separate ways. I was surprised to see him working at a construction site, however—surely the school wouldn't have approved such a dangerous job. It was also surprising that he hadn't remembered my name, even after being stuck with me for so long.

When school resumed the next day, he approached me as soon as I

entered the classroom.

“Could you meet me in the library during lunch, if you’ve got time?”

“Sure.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. *At least he didn’t ask to meet behind the gym.* With all due respect to Akira, he certainly didn’t have the friendliest visage, and there were even some rumors that he might be the son of a mob boss. I had a feeling he wouldn’t ask to meet in the library if he were planning to beat me up.

I nodded and took my seat, my heart still pounding. Even after having ruled out the possibility, I couldn’t stop envisioning scenarios where he extorted money from me or something. Although, if he really wanted me to keep his secret, then it should have been him paying *me* off, not the other way around. At that point, my brain was too rattled to think logically.

When lunchtime rolled around, I ate my food like always, but instead of taking my usual nap, I rose from my seat and headed for the library. Akira had sped out of the classroom as soon as fourth period ended, presumably to take part in the fierce battle for baked goods that occurred every day in front of the student store, where teenage boys whose appetites could not be sated by simple packed lunches congregated in terrifying numbers. I couldn’t imagine choosing to head into such a war zone; Akira was a brave man.

Our school’s library was just past the main entrance, and the female librarian was always on duty. Students were free to visit the library during any free period, but this was the first time I’d come to it outside of our contemporary literature class. It seemed even more out of character for someone like Akira to visit the library, so I had to wonder why he’d selected it for our meeting.

“Hey, thanks for coming.”

I was so startled by his greeting that I almost responded with “Thanks for having me,” but I managed to keep a straight face. I nodded and sat down in the chair across from Akira.

“So, I’ll just cut to the chase. I wanted to talk to you about what you saw yesterday.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone,” I responded, and Akira’s face

immediately lit up. It was probably a much subtler change in expression, but I'd spent so many hours looking at my stone-faced self in the mirror that I was able to pick up even the tiniest change.

"Just one question. Why are you so determined to keep it a secret? It's not as though it's against the rules or anything."

"Yeah, uh... About that..." Akira bashfully turned away and scratching his cheek. "It's just kinda lame to be *that guy*, y'know what I mean?"

"Um. No, I really don't."

"You know! The kind of guy everyone treats differently because they know that 'Oh, he's working real hard to support his *family*,' and shit like that. It goes against my aesthetic."

"What's wrong with working hard to support your family?"

"Nothing. I just don't want people to treat me differently because of it."

In a way, I could relate. I generally stayed late after kendo club to do more practice swings or go for endurance runs, and I kept that a secret from my fellow club members so as not to make them feel inferior to or different about me. "So don't you dare tell anyone else about this, okay? Especially not my sister."

"Sister? You have a sister too?"

"Yeah, she's a year below us... Wait. What do you mean, 'too'?"

I pulled out my cell phone and showed him a picture of my sister and a friend of hers taken in a photobooth (she'd sent it to me unsolicited). I pointed at the tall, ponytailed girl on the right who was doing some sort of bizarre monkey pose.

"This is my younger sister," I said.

"Well...then I guess introductions are in order, because that's *my* little sister," said Akira, pointing to the cute short-haired girl making peace signs next to her.

"Imagine that... Our sisters were best friends all this time and we had no idea."

"No kidding. I can't believe you're Keika's older brother. But now that you're telling me this, I can totally see the resemblance."

"Likewise."

Akira and his sister, Yui, looked so similar that I couldn't believe I hadn't pieced it together before. They'd obviously begun to look different after puberty kicked in, but as children they had been almost identical. The only way to tell them apart would have been Akira's ever-disinterested stare.

"We should talk again sometime, if that's cool with you," said Akira.

"Absolutely," I said, nodding several times. "And please, call me by my name."

"You got it, Kyousuke. And you can call me Akira, too."

"Very well. So tell me, Akira—obviously we have summer school this week, but assuming we didn't, what would you be doing right now?"

"Oh, probably handing out flyers for our little caricature business. My sister had to drop out of art club for family reasons, but she's really talented, so now she does paid commissions on the side."

Never had I thought I'd be grateful for having to come into school over summer vacation, yet here I was. Akira and I continued to interact over the following weeks and months, and when our sophomore year rolled around, we were placed in the same class yet again, right alongside Satou. Not long after that, we found ourselves summoned to the world of Morrigan.

Here, I was a samurai class—likely a reflection of my experience in kendo club—and Akira was an assassin. But he'd kept his presence hidden for quite a while after we arrived, so I hadn't even known he'd been summoned with us until our first group meeting. I hadn't read many fantasy novels before, but even I could tell there was something strange about the king and princess. Perhaps I owed that little inkling to my Intuition skill.

"Status."

KYOUSUKE ASAHINA

RACE: Human

CLASS: Samurai (Lv. 5)

HP: 400/400

MP: 600/600

ATTACK: 1400

DEFENSE: 800

SKILLS:

Mathematics (Lv. 6)

Curved Swords (Lv. 4)

Dual Blades (Lv. 1)

Intuition (Lv. 8)

Fire Magic (Lv. 1)

EXTRA SKILLS:

Understand Languages

Tactician (Lv. 3)

Those were my stats upon exiting the labyrinth after our first expedition. It felt like quite the upgrade to me. I was only slightly below Satou now, who was supposed to be the hero. My Intuition skill, however, was unbelievably high.

Judging from my levels in Mathematics and Curved Swords, it seemed my life experience back in Japan was reflected in my skills here. If Intuition was the same, then it would explain why I'd always had such a knack for sniffing out secrets. Regardless of the reason for this abnormal skill level, I wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

The King of Retice and his daughter were awfully suspect, but the knights (especially Commander Saran and Vice Commander Gilles) appeared to be good people. Their training regimens were strenuous, but I knew they were working us to the bone for our own good. Meanwhile, Akira conducted undercover operations unbeknownst to any of us. I hadn't spoken to him even once since we arrived here, but I had a good idea as to what he was up to. If he wanted to talk to me about it, I'd let him broach the subject. I was more than happy to assist in whatever ways I could.

I wished he'd taken me with him when he fled the castle after Commander Saran's murder, and I wasn't sure why I hadn't run away with him. All I remembered was our classmates acting awfully strange,

myself included. I remembered being plagued by thoughts like *I need to stay here*, and *I'll never forgive that villain*, that felt as if they'd been placed in my head. My body wouldn't do what I told it to. This subsided after a few days, but it still felt like something was off.

The strange sense of unease vanished after I destroyed the black crystals in the princess's bedchambers. I didn't know why I'd broken into her chambers, or why I cleaved those crystals in half with my sword. Something deep inside told me it was what I needed to do, and I didn't think it was my Intuition skill either...

The princess heard the sound of me breaking the crystals, and footsteps sounded in the corridor. Though there were twenty-six crystals, I only managed to break six before my pursuers drew near and I was forced to escape out the window. If I'd stayed any longer, I was sure the princess and her attendants would have caught me in the act. I didn't have the ability to hide my presence like Akira, so that would have been curtains for me.

Later that same day, the hero called a group meeting, and it was decided that a handful of us would be leaving the castle. I chose to accompany the hero on his quest, so I might one day see Akira again.

"I just don't get it, Asahina. How were you freed from the effects of the curse?" Satou asked as we made our way through the forest, circumventing the city and heading east, starting what might have been our first conversation ever.

"I destroyed a strange crystal in the princess's chambers, then felt my body grow noticeably lighter. How I knew to destroy it, I couldn't tell you."

"If ya weren't movin' of yer own volition, then maybe someone else *besides* the princess was controllin' ya? I mean, why would she ever wanna bust her own dang crystals?"

Satou went quiet as Ueno spoke. I assumed he was thinking about one of two things: whether there was a greater and more powerful evil than the princess lurking in the castle, or whether the power that had told me to break the crystals came from a potential ally. I'd given a fair bit of thought to the latter question myself and had come up with nothing. Who could it have been...? I remembered being enveloped in a strange light on my way back from training, and then my body started moving on its own. I had been fully conscious the entire time, which only made it more disturbing.

Feeling nauseous at the memory, I stepped away from the group. We'd come quite a way from the castle by this point, so it was no longer imperative that we keep moving at such a brisk pace. We could afford a brief respite. However, we couldn't let our guards down, as monsters still lived in the forest, even if they were much weaker than the ones that dwelled in the labyrinth.

"Akira... I don't doubt for an instant that you're still alive out there, but be safe."

I whispered these words where none could hear me but the trees, then pulled the katana I'd brought as my weapon out from my luggage. I'd found it lying on my bed when I returned to my room after the meeting to gather up my things. I could tell at a glance that it was immaculately crafted. Even if it were a trap, and the weapon was cursed, I decided to bring it along, thinking I could at least sell it to earn some money for our journey. But when I had Ueno examine it for me, she fortunately determined there was no curse on the blade.

The katana—blade, hilt, and sheath—was pure white and forged in the Kogarasu style with the words "Hakuryuu" or "White Dragon" engraved near the base in Japanese. This wasn't my Intuition skill speaking, just my normal intuition, but something told me this blade was one half of a pair, and its mate was somewhere out in the world. I was all but certain of it. I knew this blade would come in handy once we joined forces with Akira, and I needed to hone myself into a warrior that could stand at his side before that day came. That was my current objective.

We made it through the forest without ever noticing the mysterious individual watching us through the trees. The man turned on his heels and headed back to the castle, his knight's armor clinking softly.

"...I'm afraid you have all the help I can offer you. I've carried out Commander Saran's final orders... I wish you safe travels, o heroes from another world."

POV: ODA AKIRA

AS AMELIA AND I made our way from the seventy-ninth floor to the eightieth, I had no idea that, somewhere up on the surface, Kyousuke was setting off on a journey of his own with some newfound companions.

We'd spent an entire day looking for the next set of stairs and eventually found them hidden beneath a trap door, atop which had stood another minotaur—a monster I'd grown quite used to fighting.

"Man, that took forever," I groaned.

"You can say that again. I think that was the longest floor yet. Never thought we'd have to dig through a huge pile of monster viscera just to find the staircase."

"Well, maybe it wouldn't have taken so long if *someone* hadn't crushed that minotaur into a fine paste with their Gravity Magic and covered up the entrance."

"No comment."

If my Luck skill hadn't kicked in, we could've been wandering aimlessly for days. That skill was turning out to be a real lifesaver.

"Wonder what the next boss'll be," I mused.

"A dragon, maybe?" Amelia posited excitedly.

"Nah, I feel like they'd save that for the very last floor, know what I mean?"

"I can't say I do."

"Slaying a dragon is, like, the *ultimate* heroic feat. You can't really top that."

We made our way through the next floor, dodging deadly traps left and right.

"Did you want to head straight for the boss arena?" asked Amelia.

"Yeah. I want those sweet, sweet level-ups ASAP."

"But if you don't actually work on your technique, your body

won't be able to keep up with your stats."

Wow, Amelia's actually making a good point for once, I thought.

Amelia narrowed her eyes and glared at me.

"Is it just me, or did you just insult me internally?"

"It's just you. So? What's your master plan, then?"

"You'll map out this floor first using only your physical abilities. No skills."

Ah, yes. "I tried that once. Didn't work out so well. Almost died; would not recommend."

"Well, that's probably because you were by yourself. With two of us here, we can watch each other's backs and take action if the other person gets themselves into a sticky situation," said Amelia, reaching out a hand toward me.

I had a bad feeling about this.

"Spellcraft... Seal Skills!"

"What the...?"

A pale blue light enveloped me, and my body felt significantly heavier. My Detect Presence skill was forcibly shut off, and it felt like I'd just had my security blanket stripped away. *Right, I forgot about her Spellcraft skill. Certainly wasn't expecting her to use it to hinder me.*

"Um, Amelia? I can't use Detect Danger anymore. Or Detect Presence. Or Conceal Presence."

"I'm aware. You'll be fine, trust me."

I would've liked to know what made her so sure, but I wasn't really in the mood to find out.

Amelia looked up at me, straight-faced.

"Listen, Akira. There are three giant goblins coming from our right. See? You don't need skills if you just learn how to pick up on all the little signs."

"Hmph."

Sure enough, the giant goblins came barreling around the corner not three seconds later, wielding swords and axes likely pilfered from some unfortunate adventurers. I drew my katana from its sheath on my back (I'd placed it there because it kept jangling about at my waist) and

lunged at the first of the three.

“Fine. Have it your way.”

In the end, I couldn’t take down a single one. Amelia had to dash in and squash ’em for me right when it looked like they might kill me.

“Cheer up, Akira.”

“Ugh...”

I sat against the labyrinth wall and sighed. I probably looked like a pouting child who hadn’t gotten what they asked for on their birthday. All I wanted to do was run in and kill the next boss, but my technique was so bad, I couldn’t even kill a giant goblin. Amelia’s reassurances didn’t do much to make me feel better.

“The Adventurers’ Guild recommends being no less than Level 70 before taking on giant goblins, you know, and you were at a massive disadvantage.”

Apparently, she was still trying to cheer me up. But it was hopeless. Nothing could make me feel better after that.

“Really, Akira. What are you so upset about?”

“Can’t believe I had to get saved by a *girl*.”

I stared down at the ground to avoid Amelia’s indignant gaze. But it was true. I was most upset that I’d needed Amelia to save my ass. *Call me petty all you want, but it won’t change facts. Those things almost killed me, and she took ’em out with a single cast of Gravity Magic. I wish I was dead.*

But we didn’t have time to sit here and let me stew in my feelings.

After a brief respite, I asked Amelia about something she’d said that had piqued my curiosity.

“So there’s an Adventurers’ Guild here, huh?”

“Yeah. Adventurer is one of the most sought-after professions among the four races. As long you’ve got the strength, you can make a solid living for yourself.”

The trade-off was that they often died young. Amelia’s tone was cold and spiteful. I stood up straight, now deeply interested. Commander Saran had mentioned a particular line of work in this world

that was extremely lucrative, but with an equally extreme casualty rate—he must have been talking about adventurers. Amelia clearly had some complicated feelings about them.

“Are you an adventurer, Amelia?”

“Yes. I’m licensed to do work for them, at least.”

She pulled out a pair of dog tags from under her collar.

Not the sort of thing I’d expect royalty to have around her neck. So that’s proof of membership, eh? I’ve gotta admit, they look pretty badass.

“Sorry, you can’t have them.”

“Yeah, no duh! I was gonna make my own! God!”

“Well, you were looking at ’em like you *really* wanted ’em. What’s the matter, li’l greedy-grump? Are we wanting what we can’t have again?”

“Please stop talking like that. It’s obnoxious.”

From what I could see, the first tag had Amelia’s name, race, and class written on it, while the second was blank. My puzzled expression gave my curiosity away, and Amelia explained the purpose of it. I was impressed every time this girl seemed to have her act together; I assumed she’d be nothing more than an airheaded comic relief character. Perhaps it was her sister’s influence—though I had a sister, too, so what was my excuse?

“This tag is for displaying your adventurer rank. Different ranks get different colors, so there’s no need for engravings.”

“Ohhh, gotcha. So what rank are you?” I asked, and her face stiffened up a bit. I’d just tripped a land mine. *Whoops.*

But she answered anyway.

“Second from the top. But the difficulty varies by race, so being a top-ranked human isn’t the same thing as being a top-ranked elf.”

“Dang, so you’re at the second highest possible rank for elves? That’s pretty incredible, isn’t it?”

“I suppose so. But my sister’s at the highest rank.”

It always came back to her sister, didn’t it? Every time she came up, Amelia looked on the verge of tears. I wanted to ask more about this girl, but it felt inappropriate to pry, so I didn’t. I’d met Amelia only a

few days ago, though we already had a surprisingly good rapport. I was usually an awkward mess this far into the process of getting to know somebody, but perhaps fighting alongside her through battle after ruthless battle helped to break down those barriers.

“If your tag’s silver, I’m guessing the top rank would be gold?”

“Correct. And only four people in the entire world have gold tags. They’re the strongest warriors in all of Morrigan. Or they were.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked knowingly, inclining my head.

“Well, now *you’re* the strongest. For the record, there’s always been another rank above gold.”

“Yeah? And what color is that one?”

“Black, if I recall correctly. It was the Hero of Legend’s favorite color. But there hasn’t been a black-rank adventurer in over a century, so most humans and even elves have forgotten it’s even a thing.”

Right—elves lived longer lives than humans, though they had children less frequently.

“How old are you, anyway?”

“Akira! You never ask a lady her age!”

She punched me in the gut at the speed of light. *Guess that’s one topic that no amount of rapport can make up for.*

Thankfully, her low attack stat meant the blow didn’t hurt. At 400, she was already four times stronger than the average human, but it felt like a mosquito bite to me. I was starting to grasp just how weak the humans of this world truly were in comparison to me. I could scarcely believe they’d beaten back the beastfolk to take the continent. *Must have won through numbers alone.*

“Yeah, yeah. My bad. Anyway, you wanna get going?”

“You still wanna keep moving? Are you sure your body can handle that?” Amelia asked, looked at me with concern.

I hopped to my feet.

“Sorry, but I can’t stop getting stronger. I’m just going to have to grin and bear these trials and tribulations, even if it kills me.”

I smiled down at Amelia.

Her face turned red as she crammed her dog tags back into her shirt and stood up to join me.

“Well, then I’m coming with you... I mean, I did p-promise to stick with you.”

“Cool. Thanks.”

That probably sounded like a fairly cold response, but it was the most affection I could muster. I could already feel myself blushing up a storm, so I turned my back to Amelia and headed deeper into the labyrinth.

“Looks like a white bat up above.”

“I see it.”

A few steps later, Amelia called out to me again, but I heard its wings flapping well before she pointed it out—the fruits of my skill-sealed labor. It was worth mentioning that a white bat wasn’t just an ordinary bat that happened to be white. It didn’t travel in a colony, and it was about the size of an adult human man. It had jagged claws and razor-sharp teeth that could chomp a person right in half. The one before us was a high-level specimen.

“It has no sense of smell, sight, or hearing. It perceives its targets’ movements via a sixth sense of some sort,” Amelia explained.

“Gee, that sounds real fair.”

I drew my katana and swung it down in a diagonal slash. For a moment, I thought I’d chopped off the beast’s head, but I’d barely scratched its white fur.

“White bats have the ability to distort their opponent’s perception too. Pretty much the perfect enemy for our current purposes, eh, Akira?”

“You could’ve told me that *before* I started slashing at it, y’know.”

I hadn’t fought anything that had disrupted my hearing or vision before. Though I had fought a few monsters that could turn invisible, which was a struggle. I’d had to resort to Shadow Magic just to snuff ’em out.

“I’ve only sealed your skills, not your mana. And mana resides in all of us, whether we’re cognizant of it or not. If you can learn how to draw from that power, you can use it to enhance your physical

capabilities.”

Unfortunately, I wasn’t exactly in a position to pay close attention to Professor Amelia’s lecture, but I tried my best to answer regardless.

“So I...just need to...use that power...and condense it into some sort of...makeshift strengthening spell?” I panted out the words as I struggled to keep up with my foe. I’d avoided its most deadly attacks thus far, but my body was already covered in cuts and bruises from the skirmish. “All right, mana... Let’s see what you can do...”

It was like I was manipulating my mana separately from the rest of my body. Ever since my first attempt to hide my presence from others back in my world, I’d felt there was some kind of power deep inside me. When I came to this world, I’d finally figured out what that was: the feeling of attuning the mana inside me to the mana floating in the air, of achieving harmony, then stretching that coalesced mana out to cover my entire body. That’s what Conceal Presence really was. But what if I were to unleash that gathered mana into the world instead? Almost like a mist. Or an energy field.

“Worth a try, at least.”

“Akira?! What are you closing your eyes for? That thing’s gonna kill you!”

But I’d already closed off my mind from the outside world. Amelia’s voice didn’t register in my brain; nothing could break my focus. I channeled my energy, resonating my mana with the world around me, then unleashed it.

“Aha! There you are!”

I could now perceive the white bat’s true form—not just the illusion it was projecting—as it looked around, trying to figure out where I’d disappeared to. I hadn’t been fighting like an assassin recently, so it had been a while since I last sized up a target from behind. What a disgrace I was to the assassin name, having forgotten what the sensation felt like. I swung Yato-no-Kami with all my might and the bat’s head tumbled to the ground.

“Well? Whaddya say to that, Amelia?”

“How...? How could *he* be capable of that?”

“Amelia?” I asked again, but she just kept muttering to herself, her beautiful face twisted in vexation. I clapped her on the shoulders,

and finally she looked up at me. “Are you okay? You can take a rest if you’re not feeling up to this right now.”

“N-no, I’m fine. Akira, what *was* that just now?”

I tilted my head in confusion. Did it really look that strange to the outside observer?

“I mean, I just made my mana resonate with my surroundings, then unleashed it into the air around me like you said. Why do you ask?”

“Akira. Normal people can’t achieve mana resonance like that, let alone control the mana that surrounds their bodies. I’ve only ever heard of one exception.”

I was confused. How could it be impossible if I’d just done it?

“Can you control the mana around you?” she asked.

“Hm? Well, yeah. Come on back here!” I called, and the mana shot back into my body.

Amelia looked at me like she’d just seen a ghost.

“What? Is that so weird?” Suddenly I felt very self-conscious. I didn’t realize I’d just done something abnormal.

What Amelia told me next didn’t help my anxiety—no, it shook me to my core.

“The only person in history who’s ever done what you just did... was the Hero of Legend.”

“Say what?”

Apparently, I’d just put myself on level ground with the strongest person Morrigan had ever seen.

POV: AMELIA ROSEQUARTZ

NEVER IN MY LIFE had I felt sorry for myself, yet all the grown-ups closest to me had always treated me like I deserved pity. Why, I couldn't say. Maybe it was my silver-white hair. Or red eyes. Or that my sister was superior to me in every possible respect. I honestly didn't know anymore.

It was true, of course, that my sister was more beautiful and extremely powerful. Over the years, she'd charmed everyone and taken everything from me. First my parents, then my friends, then even the man I was engaged to marry. Sooner or later, they all took her side and treated me as though I was the villain harassing her. She cried fake tears and went on long tirades about how heartless I was, how abusive. They believed every word.

Eventually, I was forced to leave the Holy Tree and banished from the elven domain entirely. Not one person believed my testimony or my innocence; I couldn't trust any of them. I was chased from the forest by my sister, and though my memories were a little foggy after that, I recalled falling into the ocean from a steep cliff, after which I must have washed ashore on the human continent of Kantinen. I woke in an unfamiliar forest and, before I could get my bearings, was swallowed by a black slime. I was prepared to die in that monster. Heck, I thought I already *was* dead.

Then I arrived deep inside a major labyrinth—the Great Labyrinth of Kantinen. I was saved by an unsophisticated (but seemingly good-natured) human boy with deep black hair, who watched over me while I was unconscious and made food for me once I woke.

I assumed the slime had been designed to abduct elves. Such abductions had caused a bit of a stir in recent months, and it was suspected a group of elf traffickers had made the genetically modified slimes specifically for their purposes.

I believed I'd almost fallen victim to them for two reasons.

First, I could sense the presence of humans nearby shortly before I was devoured—and not just one or two of them. No, there had been a whole village in close proximity. It made no sense for a monster to go

after a side dish like me with a buffet so near at hand. The slime would have made short work of so many noncombatants and any low-level adventurers.

Second, the slime dragged me down into the depths of the Great Labyrinth of Kantinen—far below where you'd normally find slimes of its level. Labyrinth monsters generally didn't move between their respective sectors, so it was rare to find low-level monsters on deeper levels and vice-versa. The only exceptions were the rare occasions when monsters would flow out of the labyrinth to assault neighboring villages, but that only happened once every few years.

My only hypothesis to explain the beast's odd behavior was that it had been planning to abduct another person before returning to its master. Its body had more than enough room to fit another person. Furthermore, if the perpetrator was not, in fact, looking to kidnap elves specifically, but instead people with abnormally high levels of mana, then the boy who rescued me would certainly fit the bill. That still wouldn't explain why the kidnappers were releasing their slimy minions on the human continent, since humans generally had far less mana than elves, but perhaps there was something about this boy in particular they wanted.

Luckily, I had the ability to see through anyone and everyone, a skill the other elves had always resented. I used World Eyes and took a peek at the boy's stats.

AKIRA ODA

RACE: *Human*

CLASS: *Assassin (Lv. 68)*

HP: *23000/23400*

MP: *8400/9100*

ATTACK: *15600*

DEFENSE: *10400*

SKILLS:

Mathematics *(Lv. 5)*

Negotiation *(Lv. 5)*

Assassin Tools *(Lv. 8)*

Assassination (Lv. 8)
Curved Swords (Lv. 9)
Short Swords (Lv. 5)
Conceal Presence (Lv. MAX)
Detect Presence (Lv. 9)
Detect Danger (Lv. 8)
Intimidate (Lv. 7)
Roar (Lv. 3)
Dual Blades (Lv. 3)
Mana Control (Lv. 8)
Illusion Magic (Lv. 1)
EXTRA SKILLS:
Understand Languages
World Eyes (Lv. 2)
Shadow Magic (Lv. 7)
Luck

My heart skipped a beat. Something wasn't right. The human boy's stats were impossible. He was far more powerful than even my sister, who was supposed to be one of the four strongest individuals in the entire world—a gold-rank adventurer. His attack power alone was already far beyond that of the last Demon Lord. Yet his presence left almost no impression at all. He didn't give off the aura that normally accompanied such power.

Perhaps sensing my gaze, he whirled around to look at me, and I pretended I'd just woken up. Though clearly annoyed to be babysitting me, he asked me how I was feeling, and I responded in a panic. My voice immediately cracked, still hoarse from having gone without food or water for so long. He must have picked up on this, as he quickly offered me some roasted monster meat and bread. My stomach grumbled at the sight of it. Unable to quell my bodily functions, I snatched it out of his hands and dashed off to devour it in a corner of the corridor.

Thus began my first interaction with Akira. He provided me with food and water, and he was perhaps the first person who ever looked me straight in the eye without a hint of scorn or disdain. He even said he hated “perfect” people and fully accepted me, the most imperfect elf there was. I had no gold hair nor azure eyes like the rest of my people, yet he thought nothing of it. After being cast out from my own species, that meant the world to me.

“Hey, Akira. Is my hair weird to you? Or my eyes?” I asked.

Even then he didn’t avert his gaze.

He looked baffled that I would even ask, then answered confidently, “What the heck are you talking about? I’ve never met anyone with hair as beautiful as yours. And your eyes are striking too.”

Granted, he hadn’t met my sister and couldn’t compare us, but I felt like it wouldn’t change anything—like he would still choose me. Just being around him made my heart race, and whenever his skin brushed against mine, I felt an electric current coursing through my body, my knees quaked, and my heart skipped a beat.

There was no doubt in my mind: this was love at first sight.

I’d never once blushed for any of my handsome noble suitors, nor even at the sweet nothings my ex-fiancé would whisper in my ear. But when this boy ran his fingers through my hair, I turned redder than a tomato. I wanted to stay by his side forever, to be his steadfast ally through thick and thin. Even if everyone else in the world had it out for him, I wouldn’t abandon him. Such was the oath I made to myself. An oath I knew in my heart I would never break.

“Let’s stick together forever, Akira. Okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. Something tells me I couldn’t get rid of you even if I wanted to.”

“Nope!”

For perhaps the first time in my life, I couldn’t help but be grateful to my sister. If she and the other elves hadn’t betrayed me, I never would have met Akira. With a gentle smile, I said a silent thank-you to Kilika, and to all the other elves who’d spurned me.

POV: ODA AKIRA

AT LONG LAST, we reached the eightieth-floor boss arena. We'd found the door about twenty-four hours prior, but we decided to take a day to recuperate before heading inside for a couple of reasons. The first was that Amelia's Spellcraft ability had a two-day cooldown period during which she couldn't create any new spells. We knew we might not need the skill to fight the boss, but we wanted to be ready for anything. One might have guessed the other reason for resting would be so Amelia could recover her MP, but since it was nearly infinite, recovery wasn't needed. The second reason we waited was so I could get in some additional sword training while my skills were still sealed.

"Okay, Amelia. You ready for this?" I asked as I did some warm-up stretches.

Amelia, who had been meditating to focus her mind, opened her eyes and nodded.

"Ready as I'll ever be. Go ahead and open it whenever."

"All right. Here goes nothing," I responded, opening and closing my fists a few times to loosen up the joints.

"C'mon, this'll be a cinch. With our combined powers, the boss won't even know what hit it."

"Sure hope you're right about that," I said, drawing my katana and placing one hand on the massive door. I opened the door slowly and it shut itself behind us.

"What the?! Akira, watch out!"

Just as I was scratching my head in confusion at the seemingly empty boss arena, Amelia cried out with a terror I hadn't heard from her before. I felt the presence in the next instant and leapt back. Not a second later, scorching flames rained down where I'd just been standing.

"What the hell was that...?"

My entire body broke out in goosebumps. Amelia searched frantically for the source of the flames.

“Look alive! More flames incoming!” she cried, and I jumped deftly to the side.

This time, I wasn’t able to dodge the attack completely, and the flames singed my right thigh.

“Ugh!”

“Akira, did you see it?!”

“Just barely. Definitely not a kind of monster we’ve fought before,” I said, grimacing.

Amelia gazed up at the ceiling, and her face went deathly pale.

“Maybe you haven’t, but I have. That’s a dragon. My sister and I had to fend one off to protect our Holy Tree a long time ago. But this one looks way different from the one Kilika slew.”

“Wait. That thing’s a dragon?!” I gasped, looking up at the ceiling along with her.

“GRRRRRAAAAAAGH!”

Though the ceiling was high above us, I could easily make out the shape of something massive clinging to it—a shadow so large, it made the high ceiling seem like an optical illusion. It was indeed the fabled fearsome beast. According to Commander Saran, dragons were nearly extinct, and only a few species could match them in ferocity.

“Did I jinx us with my dragon-slaying fantasy a while back...?” Amelia murmured.

The black dragon sized us up with glimmering golden eyes. I’d figured we wouldn’t have to fight a dragon until the final level of the labyrinth, but I was obviously way off. Amelia had been right on the money.

“Hey, Amelia. Think you can drag that sucker down to earth with your Gravity Magic? Don’t think it’s a good idea to let it keep sniping us from above.”

“I could probably do that, but we don’t know how big it really is, so we’d run the risk of being crushed beneath it. I wouldn’t recommend it,” she said, looking at the burn on my right leg.

The dragon didn’t wait for us to finish our conversation and continued spitting fireballs one after another.

“Don’t worry about me. I can walk this off. But we’re sitting ducks

down here. Sooner or later, one of those fireballs is gonna hit its mark.”

“All right.” She pursed her lips and nodded. Then she reached her hands skyward and said, “Gravity! Get down here, you stupid dragon!”

“GRAAAAAGH?!”

The black-scaled beast’s body trembled with the force of Amelia’s gravitational pull. One by one, its claws lost their grip on the ceiling, which was beginning to crack. As the dragon fought to resist her Gravity Magic, it ceased throwing fireballs and tried to spread its wings. Amelia quickly used Gravity to force them closed, and a few moments later, the dragon plummeted toward the ground. Gripping Yato-no-Kami in hand, I braced myself to receive the beast. Just before it hit the floor, it twisted its body, landed on its feet, and glared down at me.

“Sorry, big guy.”

I drove my blade deep into the dragon’s neck, through its hard black scales, and sliced down the length of its throat. I stood there, stunned at how easily my sword had carved through the beast’s hide, then withdrew it and leapt back to where Amelia was standing. “Akira, watch out!” she yelled as I neared her.

“GRRRAAAAAAGH!”

“Argh!”

Her warning came too late. I just managed to push her away before I took a direct hit from the dragon at point-blank range. It swatted me like a bug with its powerful claws, and sent me flying across the room.

“Akira!” I heard Amelia shriek from the other end of the arena.

I was glad to hear she was okay, even if I felt bad for shoving her. A stinging pain shot through my back—my spine was probably badly bruised from crashing into the wall. Luckily, my katana was intact and unscathed, just coated in dragon’s blood. Amelia rushed over as I tried to get back on my feet.

“Akira, are you okay?”

“Mostly... How the hell is that thing still standing, though? I carved its damn throat open.”

“When it comes to monsters, dragons are in a league all their own. You can’t compare them to anything you’ve fought before,” Amelia

asserted, running her hands over my body to make sure I didn't have any particularly grievous wounds.

I regained my footing and looked over at the dragon. Its gold eyes pierced the dim light as it glared at me.

"Not sure how I can do any better than that, but okay," I responded.

"Well, it's not flying around anymore, and my magic's worn off, so it's not like we haven't had any effect. If anything, I'm impressed by how sharp that blade of yours must be to have pulled that off," Amelia said, looking at the katana in my right hand.

I raised it up a bit. I hadn't slain a dragon before, so I had no frame of reference, but it did feel like the blade had cut through its scales too easily.

"Well, it is a special sword, I guess," I mused, recalling the smile on Commander Saran's face when he gave it to me. Maybe it wasn't so strange for a sword forged by the Hero of Legend to be able to do what it could. "Anyway, are you all right, Amelia?"

"I'm fine, thanks to you. Pretty dreamy how you protected me."

"I recall doing no such thing, sorry," I said quickly. My pushing her out of the way was more reflex than anything, but I was glad she was unharmed. *Way to go, me.* "Anyway, what do we do about this mangy reptile?"

"I don't know, but something doesn't seem right about it."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well...it's strong, but nowhere *near* as strong as a dragon should be. I know your stats are ridiculously high, Akira, but you shouldn't have been able to harm it *that* easily."

The battle *had* felt a little anticlimactic compared to what I'd always imagined a dragon fight would be. I was amazed the beast could still stand after having its throat carved open, but it was disappointing for one swipe to nearly take out the supposed "king of all monsters." Its stat page indicated that it was indeed a dragon, but I agreed with Amelia that something felt off about the whole encounter.

"Hrm. Let me try something."

"What are you gonna do?" Amelia tilted her head.

“I’m gonna try attacking that thing head-on,” I said before dashing off.

“GRRRAAAAAAAAAAAGH!”

The dragon resumed its long-range assault the minute I started toward it, as if trying to keep me from getting too close. I dodged and weaved through the fireballs despite my injuries and finally arrived at the beast’s feet. The fireballs stopped once I got too close and the dragon tried to stomp on me instead. I expertly side-stepped the attack, then jumped onto its legs and clambered up its body.

“GRAAAAAAAGH?!”

I had to stab the dragon’s side repeatedly in order climb the slippery scales as the dragon flailed about in an attempt to throw me off and stop the nonconsensual acupuncture.

“Argh!”

“Gravity!”

Right when I thought was about to get flung off, Amelia shot out a controlled wave of Gravity Magic to stop the beast’s movements. Its massive body sank slightly into the dirt. *Right on time, Amelia.*

The dragon continued trying to shake me off after a moment, even though it was struggling to stay upright. That it could move at all under the weight of Amelia’s magic was a testament to its strength, but I wasn’t convinced this thing was a dragon anymore. “All right, you big bastard. This ends here.”

I leapt up to the dragon’s head and drove the tip of my katana deep into one beady golden eye.

“GRRROOOOOOAAAAAAGH!”

The dragon wailed, thrashing about far more tempestuously than it had before.

I put all my weight behind my katana and jammed it in even deeper.

“Now! Shadow Magic, activate!”

The shadows burst out in a torrent from my katana, quickly covering the entire boss arena and enveloping the dragon in their shade. They raged and ravaged through its internal organs, churning its brains into a pulpy purée before exiting through its eye sockets and

returning to the blade.

The dragon, defeated, sputtered out its final breath. As it began to fall, its corpse started glowing. I'd never seen a monster glow upon its death, yet the light the dragon emitted was almost blinding in the dimly lit arena. I withdrew my katana and hopped down from the dragon's head before dashing over to Amelia, who watched in disbelief. She appeared unharmed.

"Are you okay, Akira?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Got nicked a few times by that thing's super-sharp scales, but otherwise I'm all good."

"But the burn on your leg looks like it's starting to fester..."

I took a quick glance down at my thigh and waved off her concern.

"Eh, I'm running on pure adrenaline right now, so I'm sure it'll heal right up."

"Adrena-*what*?"

"I'll tell you later."

We had more pressing matters to attend to right then. I looked back at the dragon, and, as the glowing light faded, I was surprised to find the dragon replaced by a giant black cat.

"So this was the monster's true form?" asked Amelia.

"I guess so," I replied, looking around the room and failing to find any other beasts. "I noticed on its stat page it had the Shapeshifter Extra Skill, so it must've been using that."

"That skill lets the user transform themselves into anything they've encountered in the past, and since it's an Extra Skill, it could manipulate the stat page as well to make the change indistinguishable from the real thing. But you can't emulate the attack power of what you're changing into without taking some hits and getting a real sense of what it's capable of."

In other words, it could have just as easily transformed into me or Amelia after taking a quick glance at us, but for example, it wouldn't have been able to mimic the texture of our skin until it had touched it and knew what it felt like.

"So what you're telling me is this big kitty wasn't stupid enough

to take on a dragon all by itself, and that's the only reason we're still breathing."

I cautiously approached the beast. Its stat page now displayed the name "Black Cat." *Did you name it that, Eiter? I mean, it's fitting, I guess, but a little more originality would be appreciated, Mr. Creator.*

Amelia followed tentatively after me. After a minute, the black-furred beast opened its golden eyes and gazed at us. There was life in it yet.

"No human has ever made it to this floor before. It seems I may have been a bit overzealous."

The sound that leaked out of the creature's barely opened lips didn't match the booming voice Amelia and I heard in our heads. It didn't sound like a creature about to die either. Amelia and I looked around, confused, but we couldn't find another source.

"Up here, you fools. Good lord, how could I have let myself be beaten by such utter buffoons? I shall never live this down."

"Who are you calling buffoons, you stupid cat?!" I shot back.

"Yeah! Only stupid people call other people stupid!" Amelia chimed in.

The black cat squinted at us following this one-two punch of witty retorts. It didn't appear injured, let alone on the verge of death.

"By that logic, your friend there is the stupid one. Regardless: I have been given a message to convey to you from His Majesty the Demon Lord. Shall I recite it now?"

The black cat stared straight into my eyes. I could scarcely hide my confusion; I hardly knew the first thing about the Demon Lord, but apparently, he was already quite familiar with me.

"And what business could the Demon Lord possibly have with a guy like me?"

"I know not. I am not privy to his inner thoughts."

"You're actually going to listen to it, Akira?" Amelia asked anxiously.

"It'll be fine," I said, ruffling her hair. "As long as we've got each other, what do we have to fear?"

"You're right." She smiled sweetly.

Perhaps uncomfortable bearing witness to this sappy display of sentiment, the black cat loudly cleared its throat. *Ahem.*

Indignant rage burned in its eyes. It seemed even monsters were fairly judgmental when it came to public displays of affection.

"His message is thus: I await you in my castle, deep in the land of Volcano. Come and find me if you dare."

"That's it?"

"Yes. That is all I was asked to convey."

"And how in the hell did you receive that message, if you've just been chilling down here on the eightieth floor of the labyrinth?"

The black cat seemed confused by this question.

"All we monsters are of His Majesty's creation. We are his eyes and ears, his scouts on the ground. We are ever aware of his will, whether he conveys it to us directly or not, but this message was delivered directly to me by His Majesty."

"Hang on a minute. I was told that Eiter made all monsters as punishment for the four races after they started fighting each other."

"Whoever told you that was mistaken. I can assure you that I was created by His Majesty's own hand; I remember it as though it was yesterday."

The black cat's boastful tone gave me pause. I saw no reason for it to lie about its origin, but I couldn't imagine Commander Saran lying to me either. I didn't know what to believe.

"Now go on, boy. Kill me."

"Huh? Why would I do that?"

"I have no value to His Majesty now that my Shapeshifter ability has been exposed. Though I do think I made for a rather convincing dragon," said the beast with a hint of sadness in its voice.

I cocked my head. "So, not to change the subject, but how come you're just lying there?"

"Because of your lady friend's Gravity Magic, obviously. Trying to resist that last wave of it broke nearly every bone in my body, and now I can't stand up."

"Oh, so you understand how gravity works, eh?"

“His Majesty knows all.”

Perhaps the Demon Lord had been summoned from our world as well, then, as there was no such thing as science in Morrigan. That’s what the commander had told me anyway, and my talks with Amelia had seemed to confirm as much. I was initially taken aback by Amelia’s knowledge of gravity as well, but I figured maybe the elves had some record of it, or had intuited the concept from the magic. Or maybe a previous visitor from my world had taught her about it. It certainly wasn’t beyond the realm of possibility. Hell, there were streetlamps and security cameras back in Retice, and while the technology hadn’t reached the common folk yet, someone must have taught the nobles about it.

“Hurry up and kill me, already.”

“Nah. I don’t think I will.”

“Why not?!” the black cat hissed, baring its fangs.

Taking advantage of the fact that the beast could no longer move, I kneeled down and ran my fingers through its fur. It was warm and fluffy, and my hand sank into it.

“I could never kill a cat with such a beautiful fur coat.”

“Yeah, Akira never kills feline monsters. He just pets them like crazy.”

“What?!”

It was true—I was a huge cat lover. I loved how they played hard to get, and I could spend years nuzzling their fuzzy-wuzzy fur. Ever since I’d taken the chance to pet a friendly stray on my way home from elementary school one fateful day, there had been no room in my heart for any other animal. Only cats. And yes, I knew they said black cats were bringers of evil and misfortune, but I couldn’t bear the thought of treating any cat like a villain. Any misfortune that befell me would be my own fault.

“This can’t be happening to me. If I go back to His Majesty after this, I’ll be the laughingstock of the entire castle.”

“Then why don’t you come with us instead? That way the Demon Lord can keep his eyes on us at all times, and I can cuddle you whenever I want. It’s a win-win!”

I turned to Amelia for approval, but she was too entranced by the

cat's fur coat to notice. I had a feeling I knew what her answer would be.

"I suppose I don't mind. But I won't assist you in killing any of my monster brethren."

"Of course not. But you've gotta let me nuzzle you at least thirty times a day."

"Me too!"

"You two are so bizarre. But very well. I shall accompany you for the time being," the black cat said, as though it was doing us some massive favor.

"Yeah, well. You don't really get a say in the matter anyway. Amelia and I won the battle, so we get to decide your fate. Capisce?"

And so we gained a third party member via rather unconventional means.

"Um, Akira? I'm not seeing a way to the next floor."

"Huh?"

We'd just finished cuddling with our new companion and were getting ready to leave, but Amelia was right. There was only the door we'd come in through and nothing else.

"I suppose I might be to blame for that," said the black cat after letting out a great yawn. Amelia and I both glared at the beast, demanding an explanation. *"This is a boss arena, you see. And I am its boss. It is not in the labyrinth's will, written by the first Demon Lord, for both challenger and boss to leave this room alive. Nor was it His Majesty's intent for his underlings to leave their posts at all. I am trapped on this floor, fated to either fight or die."*

"So the labyrinth *does* have a will of its own. Man, that's spooky."

According to Commander Saran, beneath the lowest level of each great labyrinth was a "heart" or "core" of some sort. If the heart was destroyed, the whole labyrinth would crumble to dust. As no one had successfully reached the bottom level of a labyrinth before, let alone destroyed one, there was no telling if the commander's words were true.

"Hence why I told you to kill me in the first place. Or would you rather starve to death down here? I knew you non-demons were lesser

beings,” the beast muttered.

I looked at the ground, struggling to come up with a solution. I didn't want to let the Demon Lord have his way.

“You're not wrong. Killing you would probably be the easy way out,” I admitted.

“But it's too early to throw in the towel just yet,” said Amelia, and the cat and I turned to look at her. She was staring the black cat directly in the eye. Red versus gold.

“Have you any other ideas?”

Amelia turned and fixed her gaze on me.

“You have to give it a name, Akira.”

“A name?”

I didn't understand what the significance of this gesture would be, but apparently I was missing something, because the black cat was nodding in agreement.

“Of course. That way, I would cease to be merely the boss of this arena, and we could all leave this room! Even so, creating such a pact is no mean feat...”

“Akira can control his mana at will just like the Hero of Legend. If anyone can pull it off, it's him. Plus, I think you'd make a great monster companion—all you have to do is use Shapeshifter to transform into a normal-sized cat and no one will even know you're a monster.”

“Very well, then. Give me a name, boy, and be quick about it!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Can someone explain to me what I'm signing up for here?” I asked, flustered.

The black cat looked like it might pounce on me in its excitement. It was smaller now than it had been as a dragon but still big enough to crush me.

“You are going to become my new master.”

“Uh... Could I get a *bit* more information than that?”

I turned to Amelia for guidance, figuring the black cat was too giddy to speak sensibly. Amelia's cheeks were red for whatever reason, but she was still a better option than the feisty feline.

“Only demons can control monsters,” she began. “But once every

few centuries, someone from another race is born with the ability to create monster pacts. The last one came well before even I was born. It's not usually an elf," she said with a sigh. "It was the Hero of Legend who came up with the idea of naming monsters—by giving them a name, you create a tangible bond between yourself and the monster."

This Hero of Legend guy sure got around. It was starting to feel a bit like he was the only one who'd ever accomplished anything in this place.

"And what does this 'tangible bond' do for me?"

"Well, for one thing, it lets you keep track of where your monster is at all times."

I guess that could come in handy. No more getting separated. But I suppose that also means the monster loses a certain level of freedom...

"Also, you both gain access to a type of magic called Telepathy."

"As in, the ability to communicate with each other without opening our mouths?"

"I've never used it myself, but I *think* that's how it works."

I was starting to get as excited about the prospect as the cat. I mean, what a deal! Obviously, our black cat could already speak just fine—weird as that was—but most monsters lacked the ability to communicate verbally. Telepathy was probably for monsters like them. "A bond cannot be made unless both parties consent to it. You cannot threaten or coerce a monster into a pact or vice versa."

"But once the pact is made, it also cannot be broken without either the consent of both parties—or their deaths," the black cat continued.

"So it's 'til death do us part, eh?" I asked, though that sounded a bit ominous.

The black cat nodded, seeming almost amused by the prospect.

"And if one member of a pact dies, the other dies too. That's just how it works," Amelia said.

"Well, damn. That's a little intense."

Guess that's better than having to suffer the pain of loss. I'd rather die than be forever in pain, personally.

Amelia looked at me with concern, but I was fine. Death was terrifying, but I knew I wouldn't bite the dust so easily with her by my

side. And that wasn't just sentiment—if I died, she could use her Resurrection Magic on me, and I'd be fit as a fiddle again.

“How peculiar. An ordinary human would falter and flee upon hearing such conditions. On top of that, I can feel your mana resonating... Are you certain you're merely a human?”

An ordinary human wouldn't go slaying dragons either, now would they? Despite my knee-jerk defensiveness, I really didn't like being treated like an anomaly because of my stats, and I slumped my shoulders dejectedly.

“I mean, maybe you're right. Maybe I'm some mythical beast that's right up there alongside dragons and whatnot.”

“Well, let's not get cocky, now. Though, in all honesty, I'd prefer that. Imagine my embarrassment if I'd lost to an ordinary human brat,” the black cat chortled, and I laughed along with it.

As we regained our composure, we met each other's gaze. Our minds were made up.

“Okay, then. Put your hand on his paw,” Amelia instructed, and I obliged. “Now, Akira. Give the black cat a name.” I nodded, looking deep into its golden eyes. Instinctively, I knew what to say.

“My name is Oda Akira. From this day forth, I will be thy new master. To commemorate this new pact, I shall grant thee a name,” I said, reciting the words as they floated through my mind.

“Oda Akira, my new master. I shall follow thee to the ends of the world and be thy steadfast companion 'til death do us part.”

“I dub thee Night, after thy beautiful fur coat, which so resembles the starless sky on moonless nights.”

“Night... 'Tis a fine name. From this day forth, I swear I shall answer to no other name, and serve no other master.”

“I pray we'll serve each other well, Night.”

A warm, bright light enveloped our bodies, and we had to close our eyes for fear of going blind. Even with my eyes closed, I felt an invisible connection had just been made between me and Night. This must have been the “bond” Night and Amelia had spoken of. Amelia stepped forward and placed her hand on top of ours. The blinding light receded.

“Glad to have you on the team, Night.” She smiled.

Night’s demeanor softened, perhaps due to Amelia’s calming aura.

“Likewise. I’m sure your abilities will prove invaluable, Lady Amelia.”

“Yup, that’s what I’m here for! I gotta say, that mark on your forehead looks good on you. As do the ones on your arms, Akira.”

At her words, I looked down at my arms to discover both my wrists had been branded with the same golden emblem that now graced Night’s forehead.

“Think of them as visible signifiers of your bond,” Amelia explained.



How did I stumble upon a partner who knows so much about all this stuff?

“Isn’t it great, Master? Now I’m officially yours to command,” Night said with glee.

“Yeah, except you still answer to the Demon Lord, right?” I grumbled.

“So I have two masters—what of it? Don’t sweat the details.”

I could only facepalm at this cat’s lackadaisical take. But then, I sensed a change in the dank air of the arena and looked over to see a magic circle had appeared in a corner of the room, glowing with pale blue light. It looked an awful lot like the summoning circle that had brought me to this world in the first place. I couldn’t recall every detail, but I was sure they were nearly identical.

“Looks like you were right—the way forward has just opened.”

“But Night’s still not well enough to move on his own,” said Amelia, looking at Night with concern. Now that he was our companion, I felt awfully guilty for the injuries we’d inflicted on the poor feline.

“Not to worry. One facet of the Shapeshifter magic that His Majesty entrusted to me is that any fatal blows suffered while in a transformed state will not kill me, merely render me unable to move for two or three days. Hence why it costs such an immense amount of mana to use.”

This was reassuring, but I still felt bad, even if being able to survive a fatal blow felt a bit OP to me. Then again, you could just deliver the true finishing blow after it reverted to its normal state and was incapacitated, so it evened out.

I tore into my emergency food supply. After joining up with Amelia, we’d quickly plowed through the food the commander had provided for me, so now all that was left was a bunch of monster meat I’d smoked to preserve. It was a clever tactic, if I said so myself—monsters were drawn to the smell of the smoking meat, and we killed and smoked them as well. Amelia had been snacking on the meat from time to time, but there was still a ton left.

“Well, we’re safe here at least.” I shrugged. “Let’s just take it easy for a couple days. I can tell you guys all about how I ended up here in the meantime.”

“Yeah, me too!” offered Amelia.

“Then I suppose I should tell you my story as well,” said Night.

Though we had been enemies just moments before, I was sure we’d become fast friends once we knew each other’s stories.

POV: NIGHT

THAT DAY, I gained a new master. Though perhaps calling him “my new master” wasn’t quite accurate. His Majesty the Demon Lord was still my master—that much hadn’t changed—so the boy I now called Master was more like a secondary master.

My eyes were still the eyes of the Demon Lord, as were my ears and nose. But my heart and mind, they no longer belonged to him, but to Master. At every moment, His Majesty was still monitoring Master through my eyes.

According to His Majesty, the boy was not of this world, and he had been summoned to Morrigan as a hero. The art of summoning heroes from another world to defeat the Demon Lord was an ancient rite of magic most foul. As far as His Majesty was concerned, Master was his archnemesis. One would think Master’s primary goal would be to cut down His Majesty’s forces wherever he could, yet it seemed he had no intention of defeating the Demon Lord at present, and he even told me I was free to take His Majesty’s side if it ever came down to a choice. That was my master for you—truly an enigma.

Speaking of hero summoning, I couldn’t believe my ears when Master shared he’d been summoned in a group of twenty-eight total heroes. As far as I was aware, there had never been more than four heroes summoned at once, not that I’d been around long enough to check all the historical records myself.

His Majesty had only created me a hundred and some-odd years ago, so I was still relatively young compared to most of my fellow monsters. I wouldn’t have been surprised to learn I was quite a bit younger than even Lady Amelia, my new high elf companion, but I kept that thought to myself.

Though Lady Amelia was quite smart, her breadth of knowledge was somewhat biased, likely due to her sheltered upbringing. Master, being a newcomer to this world, was fairly clueless about its intricacies as well. I supposed that made me the wisest member of the group, and as such, I spent most of my time recuperating answering various questions from the two of them, though we’d agreed I wouldn’t answer

any questions that might give them an edge over His Majesty. Not that I would have minded much—there wasn't an awful lot His Majesty could do to stop me from so far away, even if he *was* the Demon Lord. But Master insisted he “didn't want any major end game spoilers” or some such nonsense I didn't quite understand. I did however understand why His Majesty had taken such an interest in the boy—he was by far the most bewildering yet fascinating human I'd ever encountered.

“So how come you can talk but other monsters can't?”

“Why, that's simple. I was created to convey His Majesty's words unto the masses. Whenever one of the other races was plotting an invasion into demon territory, it was my job to go there and deliver His Majesty's warning.”

“Fair enough. But then, why did you transform into a dragon? You could've killed us, and then how would we have gotten your message?”

He had a point; it was generally poor form for the messenger to kill the intended recipient of their message. However...

“If a simple minion like me could kill you, then there'd be no need to convey the message, now would there? Such weaklings wouldn't have the slightest hope of ever reaching the Demon Lord, much less defeating him.”

Lady Amelia pursed her lips, apparently unsatisfied with my answer. I laughed at this, and Master chuckled as well. My initial impression of Lady Amelia was that she was a rather inexpressive girl, but our continued conversations had proved me quite wrong. I still couldn't get a read on Master's facial expressions, though.

“Oh, yeah, and I wanted to ask you about Mystic Eyes,” he said, changing the subject.

“Well, now. That's an awfully obscure and specific thing to want to know about.”

“My old mentor had one, before he was murdered.”

As soon as the word “murdered” left Master's lips, a powerful black aura began emanating from his body. His bloodlust was so strong that it hurt to even breathe around him. I didn't think he was doing it intentionally, but it was clear an immense amount of mana was flowing out from within him—enough to make his aura visible to the naked eye. I noticed Lady Amelia break out in a cold sweat. If someone didn't teach him how to control the immense power of his rage soon, he would be

unable to live around other people for the rest of his life. The sheer power... It was unlike any I'd ever seen.

"Akira, I know you're in pain, but I can't breathe..." Lady Amelia choked out.

"Hm? Oh, crap. My bad."

I was grateful to her for having the strength to speak in the suffocating atmosphere. Perhaps she was used to such outbursts, but it seemed she was his companion for a reason. I decided I'd ask her once it was less difficult to breathe.

"Mystic Eyes are a phenomenon that only occur when someone takes magical damage directly to the eyes from the Demon Lord or one of his strongest minions. This mentor of yours must have been quite the fearsome warrior," I said. I wasn't lying either; I'd only ever encountered one person who had the affliction.

"Yeah, Commander Saran was stronger than even the hero of our group, though I never did get a chance to see him use his full power," Master lamented. I didn't know how powerful the current hero was, but if Master was singing his praises, then this Saran fellow must have been quite strong indeed...

Wait. Saran? Where have I heard that name before?

"This 'Commander Saran' of whom you speak... He wouldn't happen to be Saran Mithray, would he?" I asked.

Akira tilted his head and scratched his chin.

"Hmm... Was Mithray his last name? I'm pretty sure it was..."

I was glad to be in an animal form right now. Were I transformed into a human, my furrowed brow and pensive expression would have given away how I truly felt about this revelation.

"But Akira, wasn't Saran Mithray the—"

Lady Amelia cut herself off, presumably for the same reason I was keeping mum on the subject. She and I made eye contact and wordlessly agreed that it would be best to change the subject before it was too late. But goodness, I hadn't heard the name Saran Mithray in many years. Judging from the way Master spoke of him, he must have respected the man quite a lot. There was no need for him to know the truth yet. For now, it was best he remained blissfully ignorant as to just how cruel this world could be.

“So, Akira, didn’t you have a question about how attack power works?” Amelia asked.

“Oh, right. Hey, Night? Got another question for you...”

“What is it, Master?”

“Doesn’t the Attack stat seem a little weird to you? I mean, I know there must be *some* logic to how stats work, but that one in particular feels awfully strange to me.”

“Strange in what way?”

This was the first time I’d ever heard anyone question the sanctity of stats. Even if something seemed bizarre, most people would just write off any confusion as a peculiar intricacy of the Creator’s design. *Only someone from another world would question the very foundations of ours, I suppose.*

“Like, my Attack stat is really freakin’ high, as Amelia can confirm, but even so, there have been times in this labyrinth when that ridiculous power hasn’t been enough to kill even basic monsters. It just doesn’t make sense, y’know?”

After our battle in the arena, I was keenly aware of just how unbelievable Master’s attack power was. When I asked him for an example of a time he’d struggled, he recounted a battle when he was still a fairly low level and couldn’t put a single scratch in a minotaur’s hide.

“Now, wait one minute, Master. You mean to tell me that you attacked a minotaur with your sword alone? In this labyrinth, no less?”

“Yeah. Well, it was less of a sword and more of a dagger, really. Not that I had it for very long. Damn thing shattered to pieces when I tried to slash the minotaur’s throat.”

I was dumbfounded. People often said you couldn’t teach common sense to a man who had none, and now I understood what they meant. From the sound of it, Lady Amelia hadn’t been able to answer this question either. I could understand Master not knowing the basics of how this world worked, but what was her excuse?

“Master... Blades will never work well on a minotaur, no matter how strong you are. To be quite honest, I’m amazed you’ve found success with that method at all, even at your current high level.”

“Commander Saran and Sir Gilles were landing hits with their

swords just fine,” Master retorted, seeming genuinely perplexed.

I nodded, thinking I’d finally uncovered the root of this misunderstanding.

“Yes, and they presumably had magic enchantments on their weapons. That’s one way to get around a high Defense stat. But barring that, you’d need an astronomically high Attack stat to put a dent in a defense-oriented powerhouse like a minotaur. Of course an ordinary weapon would shatter to pieces.”

It made sense now. Master’s current katana was enchanted, and no knights worth their salt would delve into this particular labyrinth without first enchanting their weapons. I assumed they’d probably given the hero and his companions suitable weapons, too, and it was only Master who’d been foolish enough to try using an ordinary dagger. Anyone who knew anything about the Great Labyrinth of Kantinen knew purely physical weapons wouldn’t work well. I decided to cautiously test the waters to confirm if my suspicions were true.

“Did you, by any chance, notice during any of your encounters here that magic seemed to work far better on a particular enemy than your sword did?”

“I guess the Chimera fight was kind of like that, yeah,” he responded after mulling it over a bit.

“That is because one of the distinguishing features of this labyrinth is that nearly every monster within has an extremely high resistance to physical attacks. You may be able to muscle your way through the first few dozen floors or so, but it’s practically impossible to make it through the later ones without relying on magic and mana-based attacks.”

Master froze as he took a moment to process this new information. Then his jaw dropped. I could empathize with his shock. Imagine learning the place you’d chosen as your training grounds was actually working against you—though in another sense, that made it the perfect place for a trial by adversity.

“Um, Night? Are you telling us that this place was designed for people to hone their *magic* skills, specifically?” asked Lady Amelia.

“I suppose you could say that, yes,” I responded, and Master looked like he’d taken a dagger straight to the heart. He hung his head low and Lady Amelia rubbed his back reassuringly. My eye twitched at even this small display of affection, though at least it felt more warranted this

time.

“So the labyrinths each have their own specific themes and characteristics, huh? This is the first I’ve heard of such a thing.”

“Well, I can’t say I’m surprised. But yes, there’s a labyrinth that’s the exact opposite of this one, where every monster is virtually immune to magic—The Great Forest Labyrinth in the elven domain, as I recall. Perhaps you’d be better served to temper your sword skills there.”

“And you’re sure of this, Night?” asked Master.

“Indeed. His Majesty told me so himself. Apparently one of the previous Demon Lords set the four labyrinths up that way so you lesser races would have a way to hone your skills and potentially pose an actual challenge to him one day. And I have never been given any cause to doubt His Majesty’s words.”

“Fair enough.” He sighed, then whipped his head up as if remembering something. “Wait, but then how do you explain the way I killed that white bat?”

“Akira, sweetie... You had to use your mana to do that. Remember?”

“Oh. Right...”

Master became crestfallen once again, and I noticed the corners of Lady Amelia’s mouth curled into a little smirk at the sight of it. She seemed docile on the surface, but perhaps she was actually one of those “sadists” His Majesty told me about.

“In any event, you could have just used Conceal Presence and none of this would have mattered. No matter how tough a foe might be, it’s awfully hard for them to put up much of a fight when you catch them unawares. You’re an assassin, remember—so why don’t you try fighting like one?”

“Fight like an assassin, huh...” he repeated.

Being around Master was ever so entertaining. One would think any assassin worth his salt would be sneaking up behind his enemies and slitting their throats left and right. Yet for whatever reason, it seemed Master had been trying to fight them head-on with brute force, like a hero or a berserker or something. The thought amused me to no end.

I was able to move again, but I was enjoying our conversations so much that part of me wanted to just stay here for a bit longer.

POV: ODA AKIRA

AFTER SPENDING another night in the boss arena, we finally approached the magic circle in the corner.

While we were waiting for Night to be able to move again, we got to hear what Amelia had to say about herself. Most of it was just silly stories from her childhood and whatnot, but there was one part that stood out to me. She'd told it as though it were a nursery rhyme or a fairy tale, yet something told me it had been about Amelia herself...

"I've heard people once used these pale blue magic circles as a form of transportation, long ago. They can teleport the user to wherever they most wish to go, or, if multiple people try to use it at once, the circle will choose its destination based on whoever has the strongest will out of the group."

My train of thought was cut short by Amelia's explanation. I snapped back to my senses and looked over at her. We needed to focus on the magic circle and choosing our next destination. Apparently even Night had no idea where this magic circle would take us.

If it really was the same as the summoning circle that had appeared in our classroom, then maybe Amelia was right. Maybe people from our world only ended up here because they wished they could be whisked away to another world. In retrospect, maybe many of the kids in my class had nursed that desire. Hell, even I'd wished I could get away from it all once in a while. I'd been suffering through my daily routine for my mom and my sister's sakes, but to be completely honest? I was sick and tired of my life being all work and no play. Maybe it had been *my* will that the summoning circle picked up on.

Now that I knew the labyrinth was actively hindering the progression of my swordsmanship, there was no reason to stay here any longer. It did feel weird stopping on the eightieth floor and not a nice round number like one hundred, but none of us could see a route leading any deeper, so we all assumed this was where the labyrinth ended.

Personally, I couldn't have cared less where the magic circle took us. If it happened to select my will, the three of us would probably end

up back in Japan. I would have found that delightful only a few weeks ago, but now things were different. I couldn't just leave my classmates behind, or steal away with Amelia while she was still estranged from her family. Of course, I would have loved to check in and make sure my family was safe, but I also wasn't ready to go home just yet. I could only pray the magic circle would select someone else's will and not mine.

With Night shrunk down to the size of a kitten on my shoulders, I gripped Amelia's hands tightly. If the three of us were to become separated, Night and I would know through our bond where the other one was, but Amelia would be on her own. I was confident I could find her no matter the odds, but I still wanted to take whatever precautions I could, even if holding hands probably wouldn't do much.

"Okay, guys. Are we all set?" I asked.

"I'm good to go," said Amelia.

"*Ready whenever you are,*" said Night.

My companions' voices were tinged with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. While I certainly hadn't minded traveling by my lonesome, at times like these I was surprisingly grateful to have some friends along for the ride.

"All right, here we go!"

We stepped into the glowing magic circle. As we did, the gentle light grew brighter and brighter, until eventually we had no choice but to close our eyes.

POV: SATOU TSUKASA

WE WERE PERHAPS more clueless about the vast new world we were journeying into than even its most illiterate, backwater bumpkin. Because we'd been forbidden from reading books at the castle, we hardly knew the first thing about this land. I still didn't understand why they'd been so adamant about that particular rule. Money, politics, geography, history, customs, culture, religion—all fell under the umbrella of the common knowledge everyone needed to get by in life, and we had none of that information about Morrigan at our disposal. The castle guards had made sure of that, and we hadn't made any efforts to dispute them. Far from it, in fact—we never even questioned it.

I wondered if Akira had been any different. Knowing him, he'd probably noticed something was fishy from the beginning and immediately started working against the royals and the guards. I couldn't stand him as a person, but I had to respect his perceptiveness and resourceful nature. Meanwhile, here I was, up a creek without a paddle...

“Wha... Hey, Satou!”

A sudden voice snapped me out of my little reverie. Asahina had appeared before me, his pure white katana slung around his waist, and he was shaking me by the shoulders.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yeah, sorry,” I responded.

I must have nodded off. I was trying my best to stay alert, but even heroes needed their shuteye.

“Try to keep it together, would you? We're in another world here, remember. If the hero slips up at the wrong moment, it could mean curtains for the rest of us.”

I couldn't help but laugh at the exaggeration, but I stood up from the rock I was sitting on anyway. We had long since left the realm of Retice and were now making our way across the other human territories in search of the peace-loving country of Yamato. For the moment, we'd

made camp in the woods just off the beaten path.

According to a traveling merchant we'd encountered along the road, Yamato bore a striking resemblance to Japan...and in fact had even been founded by heroes summoned from Japan. They did not, of course, have the same level of science and technology as modern Japan, but were almost culturally identical to Edo-period Japan. Perhaps most importantly, they had rice.

For the record, it wasn't specifically *because* it resembled Japan so closely that we'd decided to seek it out, but we'd grown so tired of eating bread all the time that we were desperate for a bowl of home-cooked rice. Which was not the most valid reason for making an intercontinental trek, but it was on the way to demon country, at least!

"By the way, Asahina...I've been meaning to ask: why *did* you decide to come along with me?" I asked as we walked back through the thicket to our other party members. Asahina's expression turned stern and he went silent. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to," I clarified. "I was just curious."

"Are you sure you want to know? You may not like the answer," he finally replied. I smiled, surprised a boy as tall and intimidating as him would be so considerate of something so trivial. A stark contrast to Akira, who never cared one bit about how other people felt. I assured him it was fine. "It's because I want to find Akira," he went on. "I thought since the two of you have so much in common, I'd be bound to bump into him sooner or later if I came with you."

Asahina seemed somewhat afraid of how I might react to this answer, yet it didn't enrage me whatsoever. Instead, I followed up with a hesitant question of my own.

"And what exactly do you think we have in common?"

"Well, if I had to say...I guess it's just that you both give off the same general vibe, maybe?" Asahina said, clearly still mulling it over himself.

That's it? You can't think of any more concrete examples than that? I wanted to scream. Then goosebumps prickled up on my arms. *Wait. Oh god. Could it be that...I only hate Akira so much because I see myself in him? ...No. No, it can't be.*

"Wait a minute. What if you only hate Akira because he reminds you of yourself?"

“Huh?!”

Asahina’s words hit me like an arrow straight through the heart. Just when I’d shrugged off the possibility in my mind, he threw it right back in my face.

“Y-you really think I’m so petty that I’d hold a grudge against a fellow classmate over something as silly as that?”

“Well, what other explanation is there?” Asahina asked, purely out of innocent curiosity.

For the first time in my life, I feared his inability to read social cues.

“Heck if I know. Okay, break time’s over! Let’s keep moving, people!”

“Hm? Well, if you say so.”

Desperate to dodge the question, I called out to our other classmates, most of whom were either replenishing their water supplies or taking naps. They all begrudgingly got up. I felt bad, but Asahina didn’t seem fazed by my sudden change in attitude whatsoever. He simply went with the flow.

“So where’s this Yamato place supposed to be, again?” asked Hosoyama as she walked up next to me.

Just behind her was Ueno; the two of them were getting along quite well on this journey. I’d hardly ever seen them exchange words back in the classroom, but apparently they had more in common than either of them had realized. *Guess that’s at least one positive thing to come out of this mess.*

“It’s on the very easternmost tip of Kantinen, right across from the elven continent. But you’ve gotta remember the Kingdom of Retice was situated right smack-dab in the middle of the continent to defend against invaders, so we shouldn’t have *that* much further to go. Maybe another day or two, if I had to guess,” I said, trying to picture the map the traveling merchant had shown us in my head.

Ueno looked less than pleased with this answer.

“I did *not* sign up for all this walkin’, y’all. I know these folks ain’t got cars or planes yet, but can’t they at least get off their rear ends and invent a dang *bike* already?”

“Really makes you realize how much we took technology for granted.”

“Man, I wanna go home,” lamented one of the boys. “Not that I hate this world or anything, but it’s just like...Japan’s where we *belong*, y’know? Nowhere else will ever feel like home.”

I gazed up at the sky and echoed the sentiment internally. I wanted to go home too. I wanted to sleep in my own bed again. All the more reason to go defeat the Demon Lord and bring peace to this world ASAP. That was my duty as the hero. Not Akira’s—*mine*. We were going to go strike down the Demon Lord, then be greeted as heroes back at the castle before linking back up with our other classmates (who I’d left in Sir Gilles’s care) and going home. If the denizens of this world wanted to gather round to see us off and express their gratitude, that was fine by me, but I wouldn’t lose sleep if they didn’t.

I assumed only the royal family knew how to get us back home. Either that, or the Demon Lord held the key. Akira was free to walk his own path in this world, just as I was going to walk mine. But it would be *me* that won in the end. *I’m gonna wipe that lackadaisical smirk right off your face, Akira. Just you wait.*

Seeing vast numbers of pedestrians bustling up and down the city’s busiest thoroughfares wasn’t exactly an uncommon sight—if anything, the throngs of people we were looking at were nothing compared to those on a busy street in Japan’s big cities. Yet we were standing in the middle of the street, mouths agape and utterly stunned. Not by the amount of people, mind you, but by the way they were dressed. It seemed we had arrived in the country of Yamato.

“Uhhh, wasn’t there a theme park like this somewhere back home? Where they let you throw fake shuriken and stuff?”

“Samurai Village?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

I half-listened to the exchange between Asahina and the wind mage Nanase Rintarou, who was one of Akira’s only other “friends” in class, and who I’d noticed was the only one speaking to Akira after we were first summoned. In fact, he was the one who’d first told me Akira was an assassin.

The men of Yamato were dressed in either hakama or kimono with swords around their waists, and the women were dressed in either kimono or shrine maiden attire with ornate hairpins. It was like a scene straight out of one of those late-night Edo period TV dramas. The shrine maiden attire seemed a bit much, but it appeared all of the women wearing it were heading toward a familiar-looking building (that will not be named), so I could only assume it was their work uniform.

“That building looks just like Himeji Castle,” Asahina pointed out.

“Ugh, thanks a lot... I was trying to pretend it didn’t exist,” I groaned.

“Oh. Sorry.”

Leave it to Asahina to completely miss social cues. I sighed and looked up at the behemoth castle.

It did bear a striking resemblance to the recently renovated Himeji Castle back in Japan, famous for the ghost story of the murdered servant girl haunting its well. The shape of the castle itself was different, but the white exterior walls were nearly identical. From a distance, it was by no means as gaudy and lavish as Retice Castle, but it was still just as imposing and impressive. Just looking at it made chills run down my spine and a cold sweat break out on my forehead...almost as if I could sense a malevolent spirit lurking within. Or perhaps I’d just come down with a fever.

“Whoops! Pardon me,” I said as a random passerby bumped into me.

“Don’t worry about it, kid. Just don’t stand in the middle of the road, all right?” the man said.

I apologized profusely, and he laughed it off before trotting away at a brisk pace. I looked over at Asahina, who continued staring at the man as he ran away. Then, he glanced at me as though an idea had struck him before he started chasing after the man.

“Hey! Somebody stop that man! He’s a pickpocket!” yelled Asahina.

“Huh?” I sputtered, before frantically patting my pockets to check for my wallet. To my despair, I discovered it wasn’t where I’d put it. As I thought about it, I realized it was strange that he’d bumped into me when I’d been standing still—either he was totally oblivious, or he’d

done it intentionally.

“What’s the matter, Tsukasa? And where’s Asahina runnin’ off to?” asked Ueno. It seemed she and Hosoyama had realized something was up.

“My wallet got stolen. Asahina’s chasing down the perp. Do you guys still have yours?” I asked my fellow party members, and they all checked their pockets before breathing a collective sigh of relief. It was only mine that had been stolen. *Great... The hero who lost his wallet to a common thief. I’ll never live this one down.*

“Thankfully, there wasn’t really anything of value in there. It was just my regular wallet from back in our world.”

“Oh. Well, that’s good. Hope it wasn’t a gift from someone or anything,” said Nanase, seemingly quite invested in my lost wallet. He and I had never really talked before, and I’d assumed he didn’t like me for whatever reason, but it appeared I was mistaken.

“It was, actually. My older brother got it for me for my birthday,” I responded wistfully. Though my brother and I weren’t on the best terms at the moment, it was still a memory I treasured.

Shortly thereafter, Asahina came running back with something in his hand.

“It seems there are plenty of Good Samaritans in this country,” he said, and I gasped as he held out my newly retrieved wallet.

I breathed a sigh of relief upon verifying that all of its contents were still packed neatly inside.

“Thanks so much. Man, you’re a fast runner. Surprised you managed to catch that guy,” I said.

“Well, as soon as I yelled the word pickpocket, it spread through the crowd like a game of telephone, and some group of local law enforcers that looked a bit like the Shinsengumi apprehended him for me.”

So they even had samurai police forces here to keep the peace. Whichever hero founded this place must have been an awfully big fan of Bakumatsu-era Japan.

“Did they have them fancy turquoise haori jackets, too?” asked Ueno.

“Indeed. And the armored headbands as well. For a moment, I honestly thought they were just a group of cosplayers,” Asahina responded, and Ueno groaned with jealousy.

She was a big Japanese history buff and had always gone full fangirl whenever the Shinsengumi came up in class. Her depth of knowledge was honestly quite impressive. She was a borderline savant.

“Okay, I think we’d better start looking for an inn that’ll put us up for the night. We can worry about hitting up the Adventurers’ Guild after that.”

“Roger that.”

I was a little surprised there were still pickpockets in such an orderly society as this, though I supposed that even the most perfect utopia would always have its fair share of crime. The thought saddened me a bit.

The inn we eventually settled on was less of an inn and more of an Edo-period traveler’s lodge, though I was too shaken from the pickpocketing incident to think about much of anything when we first arrived there. I’d never had anything stolen from me. I tried my best to shake the negative thoughts from my mind, however, and remain a steadfast leader for my companions.

At Ueno and Hosoyama’s insistence, the innkeeper of the Nightingale’s Roost lent us each a set of traditional clothing to change into, so we all went off to our respective rooms to get suited up before gathering back in the reception area.

“Man, do us guys really have to go along with this?” I complained to Asahina.

“Don’t let the girls hear you say that. It’s poor form not to comply with dress code at inns like this. And what are you complaining about? You look great.”

He and I made small talk in an out-of-the-way corner of the reception area as we waited a long time for the girls to finish getting ready. The proprietress had insisted on giving me a blue yukata with a red koi fish pattern and Asahina a black one with a fireworks pattern, while the other boys were allowed to choose plain navy yukatas. Asahina was blessed with a fine physique, so his looked good on him,

but I couldn't imagine anyone thinking mine looked good on me. His time in the kendo club had made him used to wearing traditional Japanese garb. I let out a sigh as I looked down at my shrimpy body. I may as well have been draped in a fancy curtain.

Even if I was technically stronger than Asahina, it was only because of my litany of skills. There was no way I could beat the captain of the kendo team in a sword fight. Even if I was allowed to use my skills, I was pretty sure I'd have a tough time beating him at close range. I'd learned quite early on here that the only way I could possibly beat Asahina in a sparring match was through the use of magic. *Ugh. I need to stop being so down on myself. It's getting me all pessimistic.*

"We're here!" announced Hosoyama.

"Sorry for makin' y'all wait up for us. These darn things are harder'n heck to put on. Had to get the innkeeper lady to help us out," Ueno added.

"Wh-whoa," I said, taken aback.

"Well? How do we look?" Hosoyama asked with a devilish smirk, twirling around to give us a nice view of every angle.

Ueno held out her sleeves to show us too, tilting her head with an adorable sheepishness. Hosoyama's pink butterfly kimono fit her perfectly—and I'd thought a girl with Hosoyama's curves wouldn't look good in traditional Japanese clothing. Ueno's, meanwhile, was deep blue and patterned with morning glories. They were both wearing their hair up, revealing the napes of their necks, ever so slightly moist with sweat. I had to admit, it was pretty alluring—especially for sexually frustrated high schoolers like ourselves. And these were undisputedly the two hottest girls in our class, no less. Us boys could hardly contain our excitement.

"Oh, thank you, universe! Praise all that is good in the world! I'm so grateful to be alive," whimpered one of the boys, tears welling up in his eyes.

"Well? Do you like it?" asked Hosoyama.

"W-we don't look peculiar or nothin', do we?" added Ueno.

The girls were fishing for compliments, as though our initial impressions weren't obvious enough. Every boy aside from Asahina was now weeping tears of joy. Asahina looked around, unsure as to what

was going on. The guy truly was a brick wall.

“Goddammit! Why’d I have to be born with such an ugly face?!” cried one of the boys.

“If only we weren’t so ugly... Wait! Isn’t there magic that can change your appearance in this world?!” said another.

“By god, you’re a genius! We need to look into that, quick!” exclaimed a third.

Refusing to associate myself with those three, I gave a sheepish smile and decided to take the girls’ bait.

“You both look great. If we weren’t in such a sticky situation right now, I’d have a hard time deciding which of you to fall for,” I said, and the girls swooned. It seemed I’d landed a critical hit. *Guess I made the right choice.* I’d gotten myself in trouble with other girls in the past by only giving them lip service when they really wanted something more, but I knew Hosoyama and Ueno weren’t like that.

“Now, who’s ready to go eat some rice?!” I cheered.

A short walk from the Nightingale’s Roost was a restaurant by the name of The Holly Tree. Asahina (our tallest member) had spotted a banner advertising hefty protein-and-rice bowls on our way to the inn. It was quickly agreed that this would be our dinner for the evening, and the seven of us crammed ourselves into the restaurant in a less-than-orderly fashion.

“Oh my god! They’ve even got eel bowls?!”

“And seafood sampler bowls, too!”

“Thank you, universe... I’m so glad we left that horrible castle...”

Yet again, my companions were tearing up, this time at the sight of other customers enjoying traditional Japanese food. The food didn’t look quite as fancy as a higher-end Japanese restaurant back in our world, but right now, we were so desperate for a little taste of home that we would’ve shed tears of joy for just about anything familiar. They could have served us a bowl of nothing but rice and little fried bits of tempura batter like my mom made before payday, and we wouldn’t have cared.

“What can I get ya, travelers? I can tell yer not from around these parts, but it sounds like yer already familiar with our local cuisine,” said the friendly old woman who came out from the kitchen to take our

orders after we sat down. Her hair and eye color were nothing like ours, yet she was dressed in the garb of our ancestors, and her demeanor was patently Japanese. Yes, this was classic Japanese hospitality. Seeing so much love for our home country nearly brought a tear to my eye.

“Could we peruse your bill of fare?” asked Hosoyama, her language veering toward old-timey speak, perhaps in an attempt to fit into the Edo-period setting.

“Bill o’ what? Sorry, not sure what that is.”

“You know, like a menu or something!”

“Oh, a *menu*. Why didn’tcha just say that to begin with? Here ya go.”

This looks far more like a traditional bill of fare to me, I thought to myself. It seemed the hero that founded Yamato did a rather slapdash job of it. Loanwords like “menu” hadn’t existed in the common vernacular during the Edo period.

“Thank you. Let’s see... I think I’d like the seafood sampler bowl,” I said after giving the menu a once-over. Even though it wasn’t written in Japanese, we were able to read it without issue thanks to our Understand Languages skill.

“That’s what I’ll have too.”

“Could I get the wasabi bowl with bonito flakes?”

“Jeez, you sure ’bout that, Shiroyi? That’s gonna be spicier’n heck. Oh, and I reckon I’ll have the tuna bowl, thanks!”

Everyone proceeded to give the nice lady their orders. Only Hosoyama’s order struck me as a bit strange. The fact that such a thing was on the menu implied there were others like her out there in this world. She’d been eating some rather strange things ever since we left the Kingdom of Retice, come to think of it. She kept sprinkling this foul-smelling blue seasoning (which I assumed she’d brought from the castle) over everything... *No, let’s not dwell on that. My mind can’t reconcile the image of a cute girl enjoying disgusting foods. Let’s just try to forget about it. I was probably just tired and hallucinating all those times. And that canister full of the stuff she brought with her to the restaurant must be a figment of my imagination, too.*

“And I’ll have the fatty tuna bowl with green onions. Think it’s only Asahina who hasn’t ordered yet.”

“Oh, my apologies,” said Asahina frantically. “I suppose I’ll have the chicken-and-egg bowl.”

“You got it, hon.” The old lady smiled before scurrying back into the kitchen.

As we sat there waiting for our food, my mind wandered back to Akira. I wondered if he was keeping himself properly fed. Not that I was *worried* about him, mind you—I just didn’t want to compete with someone malnourished. *Wouldn’t want to have to be the one to tell his mom he died of starvation after we finally make it back to our world*, I thought, making excuses to myself as I watched Nanase and the others chatting and laughing.

Akira’s mother could be awfully scary when she was angry. Granted, so could anyone, but she was in a league of her own. I knew they said it was always the sweet and unassuming ones you didn’t want to piss off, but I remembered how shocked I was the day after Akira and I got in a fistfight. I got a huge earful from both my mother *and* his. Akira might have trouble remembering me, but his mom sure didn’t. In fact, it was his not remembering me that enraged me enough to throw the first punch that day. I remember being way more afraid of how *his* mom might punish me than my own. Akira’s mom sat me down and told me in no uncertain terms what I’d done wrong and how I should’ve acted instead, all while wearing an eerily composed smile. I was too young at that point to understand how someone could stay so upbeat while furious, and that only made me even more afraid of her. Even now, I didn’t know if I had the emotional maturity to not get scared and run away if she ever got angry at me again. The only way to truly escape her wrath was to never incur it, so I could only pray Akira didn’t get himself killed before I could rescue him from whatever sorry ditch he’d run off and fallen into.

“Okay, kiddos! Dinner is served! Now, who ordered a seafood sampler bowl?””

“Oh, that’s me!”

Right as I finished my reminiscing, our food arrived. I decided to set my thoughts of Akira aside for now and just focus on enjoying my first rice in over a month. We all gave a prayer of thanks for the meal, then proceeded to dig in.

“Yep, that’s rice, all right!”

“Thank you, universe...”

“Is that all you ever say? I mean, I’m not knockin’ you for being excited, just sayin’.”

“Man, this is just what the doctor ordered.”

Everyone seemed to be greatly enjoying their rice bowls (aside from Asahina, who never showed a hint of emotion). I couldn’t help but be reminded of Akira again. He loved rice, so I was sure his travels would bring him to this country sooner or later. If Asahina’s ultimate goal was to meet up with him, then I’d have to make sure we accomplished what we set out to do first. Perhaps we could do a big circuit: head east from Kantinen and hone our skills as we made our way through the badlands of Volcano before taking on the Demon Lord and heading back here to Yamato.

After all, I was the hero here—not Akira. This was my job. No offense to Asahina, but I had no intention of letting Akira join up with us before we’d slain the Demon Lord. I wasn’t going to risk him stealing all the glory. *I* would slay the Demon Lord, and then we’d all be able to go home thanks to *me*. Everyone would be forever in my debt—Akira included.

Such were the thoughts that passed through my mind as I greedily devoured my rice bowl—which, I had to admit, was quite good.

Chapter 5: The Elven Domain

POV: ODA AKIRA

AS I SHIELDED my eyes from the circle's light, I felt my feet leave the ground. I was suspended in the air for a brief moment, then touched down once more. It felt just like when we'd been summoned to Morrigan. The only difference was instead of arriving in a great hall, I opened my eyes to find us standing in the middle of the woods.

"Where are we?"

"Wait, huh?!"

"*Lady Amelia?*"

All I could see around us were trees, but apparently Amelia had picked up on something else, because her face tensed. Night called out to her inquisitively, and it was plain to see that her usual cool front had fallen away and she was trembling in fear. Her eyes were locked on a single point. I tried to follow the line of her gaze, and through the gaps in the trees, I saw it—an impossibly massive tree that towered above the canopy.

The tree glistened like an obelisk in the pre-dawn light. One might be forgiven for thinking it must be much closer than it appeared, but no—it truly was that gargantuan. In fact, its full magnitude couldn't even be appreciated from our vantage point, as even just the base of its trunk shot up higher than the clouds, and we couldn't tell if there were any leaves farther up. I could only imagine how many years this tree had stood, a solemn watcher over the Sacred Forest. Night's face also grew tense upon noticing the tree, albeit likely for different reasons than Amelia.

"*The Holy Tree,*" he muttered beneath his breath. "*So we've arrived in the elven domain. The magic circle must have selected Lady Amelia's will for our destination.*"

"Wait. So *that's* the Holy Tree?" I gaped.

“Yes, behold the pride and joy of all elfkind,” Amelia scoffed. “And that which we are sworn to protect with our very lives. They say its sacred bark has the ability to repel all magic and curses, such that very few are ever allowed to even touch it. Even I, the would-be princess of this land, have only ever laid my hands on the golden leaves that occasionally fall from its branches.”

Right, I kinda forgot about Amelia being a princess. I’d sort of surmised as much when I first met her based on the Royal Grace skill on her stat page, but after witnessing her very unladylike table manners and massive appetite, I must’ve let that little factoid slip my mind. I opened my mouth to make a comment but stopped short, unsure what I was trying to say.

Then I sensed a malicious presence looming somewhere between Amelia and that tree, and I quickly pushed her down to the ground.

“Wha?!” she gasped into my chest as I shielded her from the invisible assault.

“Phew. That was a close one,” I sighed.

“Nice reflexes, Master. And I thought I was supposed to be the cat here,” joked Night.

As Amelia opened her eyes, cheeks flushed and mouth agape, I noticed an arrow sticking up from the ground not far from where we’d just been standing. The tip of said arrow was wet—probably poisoned. *Sheesh. Can’t get away from these stupid arrow traps even outside the damn labyrinth.*

After snapping out of her daze, Amelia finally noticed the arrow I now gripped in my hand.

“Is that...?” she began in horror.

“They were probably aiming for your neck. You said you were a princess here, didn’t you? I wouldn’t call this a very royal welcome,” I said with the intention of lightening the mood. I used my Shadow Magic to dispose of the dangerous arrow and scanned the surrounding area for any additional threats.

Amelia stared back at me with dull eyes and a frigid smile.

“You don’t get it. These people hate me. I don’t belong here,” she said, her voice hollow. Seeing her like this hit me like a dagger through the heart. She and I had finally built up a merry rapport in recent days,

and it felt like all that progress had shattered in an instant. I could tell I wasn't just imagining things either.

"Well, at least we don't have to worry about sullying your name any further if we need to fight back, right?" I forced a smirk, pulling out a small mana stone from my throwing knife pouch.

After rolling it between my fingers to ensure it was the proper size, I tossed it off in the direction from which the poison arrow had come, though it was more like a fastball than a gentle toss. A few seconds later, I heard the mana stone collide with a distant tree, followed by the sound of someone falling from said tree with a groan of pain. Using my Conceal Presence and Assassination skills, I quickly wove through the trees and rolled up on our fallen suspect. I communicated telepathically with Night to tell him to protect Amelia, though I didn't think there were any other assailants. Being surrounded by such densely packed trees meant I couldn't swing my katana, so instead I pulled out one of my precious few throwing knives.

I crept up on the elven man as he scrambled to his feet in an attempt to flee, and stopped him dead in his tracks, pressing a kunai-style throwing knife to his throat.

"Bwuh?!" sputtered the man.

"Freeze. One wrong move, and you can kiss your pretty little neck goodbye," I whispered in his ear. My current weapon wasn't nearly long or sharp enough to divorce his head from his shoulders of course, but he was far too frazzled to realize that. Besides, I could certainly make good on my promise by compensating with Shadow Magic if need be.

I let Night know I had the man disarmed, and he and Amelia arrived on the scene shortly thereafter.

Upon seeing Amelia, the once-docile man frothed with rage. He clearly wanted to murder her, but Amelia took it in stride and simply shook her head, looking disappointed more than anything else.

"Liam Gladiolus. Funny meeting you here."

"Amelia Rosequartz. You've got guts showing your face in the Sacred Forest again, I'll give you that," he responded, a venomous tinge to his words. It appeared the two were well acquainted. I pressed my knife harder against the man's throat, and he at last became docile once more. "Princess Kilika and her elite guard will be here any minute! They'll have your heads for conspiring with this woman, I hope you

know!”

I was quickly growing tired of this guy’s attitude, so I knocked him out cold. I figured he might make a decent hostage, so I decided not to kill him for the time being, even though I felt I would be well within my rights to do so. I hadn’t given permission to speak in the first place. But true to his word, I soon sensed several other presences heading our way at an impressive clip.

Furrowing my brow, I looked to our feline companion for assistance.

“Hey, Night. Why don’t you make yourself big again and let us ride on your back?”

“As though I’m a horse? Some cat lover you are... Though it would be in Lady Amelia’s best interest to make haste from here, so I suppose there’s nothing for it. Just don’t delude yourself into thinking that I can use this skill whenever I want, because I can’t,” he grumbled, before begrudgingly transforming into a cat large enough for three people to ride (but still small enough to move through the trees), then bending down so that we could hop on.

I slung our newly acquired hostage over Night’s back, then mounted the cat. I reached a hand down to Amelia, who seemed lost in thought.

“What’s the matter with you? We’ve gotta hightail it outta here.”

“There’s no running from elves in their own domain. They’ll catch us sooner or later, mark my words... Eek?!”

Growing increasingly irritated with Amelia’s new pessimistic personality, I grabbed her hand and yanked her up. She let out a cute squeal, then wrapped her hands around me as if hanging on for dear life. That must have given her quite the fright—this wasn’t even Night’s full size, but we were still pretty high up. And while I knew this was neither the time nor place, I couldn’t help but marvel at how tightly her body was adhering to mine as she clung to me from behind. It was a testament to the suppleness of her assets, to be sure. And I noted that her hair smelled quite nice as well, almost like sweet osmanthus. But I reined myself in, deciding it was probably best if I tried to help Amelia through her anxieties at least a little bit.

“We’re not running away. We just need to find a more open area so I can actually use my sword without it getting caught on all these

trees. Can you lead us to a clearing or something? Surely you know your way around these parts, right?"

"But they're just going to..."

"It'll be fine. Just tell us where to go. Once we find a clearing, I'll figure something out," I said calmly but firmly, trying to reassure her.

Clearly struggling to fight back tears, Amelia pointed in the direction of the Holy Tree. "There's a big open plaza that way. We use it for festivals dedicated to the Holy Tree."

"Night," I commanded.

"*Way ahead of you,*" said the cat, sitting up on its haunches and leaping off in the direction Amelia indicated, running fast enough to keep our pursuers somewhat at bay.

Meanwhile, I was struggling just to hold on and make sure we didn't lose our hostage in the process. The law of inertia was fearsome indeed.

"*We're almost to the clearing, Master,*" said Night about ten minutes later, after sniffing out the area a bit.

"Cool. Thanks for the update."

I rested my hand on the hilt of my sword, slung over my back. I'd already made up my mind. Even if every elf in the Sacred Forest wanted Amelia dead, she still had an ally in me. I wasn't about to let them have her.

Thanks to Night's incredible speed, we made it to the clearing without incident, but it wasn't long before our pursuers caught up and surrounded us in massive numbers, all of them out for blood. Yet they made no move to attack, perhaps because of our hostage. I looked around and discovered they had us completely surrounded with archers, their bows drawn taut.

"You stay up here, Amelia. Night, keep her safe," I ordered.

"*But of course, Master. They won't lay a finger on Lady Amelia,*" Night promised proudly as I hopped down, dragging the still-unconscious Liam Gladiolus in tow.

I had to admit, I was being perhaps a bit rough with him due to his annoyingly good looks. But could you blame me? *This guy's probably*

gotten a free ride his entire life solely because he lucked out in the gene pool. Anyone that attractive deserves to get roughed up a little bit if you ask me, I thought to myself with an evil grin.

“You fiend! How dare you manhandle Lord Liam like that!” yelled a particularly short-tempered archer.

I see. So this guy’s pretty popular here, eh? Must be pretty high-ranking too. If he were just some scrub, they probably wouldn’t be holding their fire right now.

“If you want me to give him back unharmed, you’ll let us go, Amelia included. Otherwise...” I warned, pressing the knife right up against my hostage’s Adam’s apple.

The elves were audibly appalled by this threat, many of them crying out in horror. Yet still they waffled, some of them looking around at their fellow elves as if unsure what to do, but none of them willing to take charge. There didn’t appear to be a leader of any description among the elves. They were clearly under orders from somebody, but no one was around to give them directions for this unexpected turn of events. I listened in, trying to see if I could hear their whispers on the wind.

“Damn humans! Taking Lord Liam hostage like a bunch of sniveling cowards... If only Princess Kilika were here. She’d show these heathens what for...”

So that’s it. They’re waiting for their precious “Princess Kilika.” Fine by me. Worse comes to worst, I can just use Shadow Magic to chop down that Holy Tree of theirs. Then we can make our escape in the ensuing pandemonium. Yeah, let’s do that.

“Cretin! What are you smirking about?!” yelled one of the more scandalized elves.

Oh, shut up. Quit barking at me like a stupid dog. I’m a cat person, you know. I can tolerate well-trained dogs, but I despise mangy mutts who don’t know when to keep their mouths shut. If you don’t start behaving soon, I’ll make sure you meet the same fate as your beloved Liam. But just as I reached for my mana stones, a frantic scream from behind me stopped me dead in my tracks.

“Lady Amelia? What’s the matter?” asked Night.

“Don’t do it, Akira... You can’t defy Kilika!” she pleaded.

I turned around to see Amelia hunched over, almost in the fetal position on Night's back. She was screaming inconsolably, practically hyperventilating.

"Amelia?" I asked with concern.

"You can't fight her! You can't!" she cried. I reached up and rubbed her lower back and her breathing seemed to calm a bit.

The elves looked at Amelia's disheveled state and whispered among themselves.

"Look, the girl's gone mad. Serves her right after all those years of abusing Princess Kilika."

"Yes, it must be Eiter the Creator's divine punishment."

"That's what she gets for desiring more than a Child of Blight deserves."

I assumed they were probably saying these things loud enough for us to hear on purpose. Now Amelia's entire body was trembling. *Assholes. Congratulations, you succeeded in traumatizing the poor girl. Happy now?*

I'd be the first to admit I didn't know everything there was to know about Amelia, but one thing I knew for sure was that she couldn't possibly be the kind of abuser these elves were making her out to be.

"And that's all that matters to me," I whispered, patting Amelia's back. Her breathing normalized, she stared down at me with weary eyes. "Hey, Amelia. These guys all seem to think you were some sort of domestic abuser. What do you say to that?"

"I mean..." She trailed off.

"If you say you didn't do it, then I believe you. Just like you've always believed in me," I said with a smile. Her eyes grew wide. "Granted, what qualifies as abuse is typically defined by the victim...but I'm guessing you only ever had the best intentions, right? I know you'd never stoop that low."

"You're right... I wouldn't. I'd never abuse or manipulate Kilika."

I'd posed my question in a loud enough voice for everyone around to hear, and Amelia, picking up on my intention, answered in kind, loudly and clearly.

"Well? You hear that, you elven interrogators?"

The elves began murmuring among themselves. I could see many of them were starting to have second thoughts about their little inquisition after seeing Amelia's current state.

Then, a new and powerful voice entered the mix.

"She's lying, of course. Why should anyone ever take the word of a blighted child at face value, for that matter? Besides, if she truly never abused me, then why didn't she simply deny it outright when Father questioned her? Why did she instead choose to run away with her tail between her legs? It's because she's guilty, and she knows it. Isn't that right, dear sister?"

The voice was coquettish and velvety sweet. The sound alone made me grimace.

"Princess Kilika!"

"Oh, thank goodness she's here!"

Cheers of joy rang out from the elven archers. I turned in the direction of the voice.

"Wait... A-Amelia?" I asked, dumbfounded.

But I soon realized that although the young woman walking toward us bore a striking resemblance to Amelia, her hair and eyes were different colors entirely. She was also slightly less buxom, and her garb seemed to indicate that she outranked every other elf in the vicinity by a country mile. There could be no doubt about it: she was clearly royalty. The worst kind of royalty, no less—the type that didn't hesitate to flaunt her noble status. I couldn't stand arrogant princess-types.

"That's her. Kilika, my little sister," said Amelia, her voice quivering.

So we meet at last, Kilika.

In many ways, she was exactly as I'd envisioned her, though in others, she was everything but. She was certainly every bit as arrogant as I'd expected, with those golden dog tags displayed proudly around her neck, telling all the world that she was among the four most elite adventurers in the world. While she looked like Amelia, her haughty expression was almost the exact opposite of Amelia's typical demeanor.

"Hmph. Not intimidated by my mere presence, are you? Impudent brat. Though I suppose I must thank you for returning this criminal

back to our shores,” offered Kilika, flipping her brilliant golden hair back in a pompous display. Her deep azure eyes finally met mine.



After flashing me a satisfied smirk, she pushed past me and the hostage I was carrying and strode directly over to Amelia on Night's back. I had to readjust my stranglehold on Liam as the collision caused him to slip from my grasp.

"Why, hello, dear sister. Long time no see," Kilika said with a bow. "I still bear the marks of your abuse, you know. Look here, everyone! See where the poisoned tincture she disguised as a healing potion scarred my delicate arms!"

She rolled up her sleeves and lifted her arms for all to see. The surrounding elves scowled at the sight of the horrific burns marring her otherwise perfect skin. The wounds were still in the process of healing, and even the smaller burns that had already scarred over were clearly never going to fade. Her fellow elves mourned the loss of her flawless beauty.

"I would never do such a thing," Amelia protested. "You must've switched it out for poison after I'd already given it to you and..."

"Oh? So you're calling me a liar now, is that it?" Kilika interrupted, and Amelia hung her head low in submission. "Unbelievable. Such accusations by my own flesh and blood." She made eye contact with me, and I saw a tempestuous firestorm burning in her eyes. It was dazzling...almost hypnotizing.

I get it now. Maybe Amelia really did singe her skin—but it was Kilika who hypnotized her into doing so.

Kilika shoved the burn marks in her sister's face, then leaned in close and whispered in her ear.

"It must be so nice being you, dear sister. Spirit mediums don't have to worry about silly little burns like this, do they? Why, you could suffer wounds that could kill any other elf and still be right as rain. What a monster you are."

"K-Kilika... You apologize to Akira, right this instant."

"I beg your pardon?"

As Kilika's ugly, twisted grin stretched from ear to ear, Amelia lifted her head and made the demand, seemingly out of nowhere, and her sister faltered for a moment. Even I felt confused as to why Amelia would say something so bizarre in this tense situation. But for whatever reason, she'd now stopped cowering in fear of her sister and, though

still trembling, was now looking her directly in the eye.

“Don’t play dumb. You just tried to use Mesmerize on him. Now apologize.”

“*Tried to?*” Kilika balked. “Oh, I didn’t just try. Your little companion belongs to me now, sweetheart. The boy could be head over heels in love with you, and he still wouldn’t be able to escape my charms. Now, *come to me, my slave!*”

So that’s how she pulled it off. Her Mesmerize skill gives her the ability to make others do her bidding. Amelia turned to look at me. I could see in her eyes that she still believed in me, and I gave a playful grin in response.

“Nah, I think I’ll stay right here,” I said to her sister. “I don’t recall being anybody’s slave.”

Kilika immediately turned back toward me, mouth open in disbelief.

“But how?! How can he be immune to Mesmerize?! No ordinary man should be able to resist my charms! Not without the use of even more potent magic! Unless... Could this boy be even stronger than *me?*” she gasped, taking a few steps back.

“Hate to break it to you, toots, but if you think you can steal my heart with looks alone, you’re dead wrong. You’ve gotta have an attractive personality too, and yours is ugly as hell,” I fired back.

“Wha?! The *nerve!* How dare you call me ugly in *any* respect, little boy!”

Kilika continued yelling, but I paid it no mind. I turned my eyes instead to Amelia, who was smiling down at me, proud to have placed her trust in me. Enraged at the sight of this, Kilika finally barked out orders to her archers.

“Loose your arrows, men! Let them rain down upon my sister and this spiteful man!”

“B-but Princess Kilika!” sputtered one of them, his eyes wide in disbelief. “They still hold Lord Liam as their hostage!”

Kilika’s eyebrows peaked in anger as she glared at the archer with the fury of a thousand suns.

“You imbecile! Would you rather risk him coming to harm or the

princess to whom you've sworn your allegiance?! Now, loose!"

"A-at once, your grace!"

The archers, who'd been shaking in their boots mere moments ago, now nocked their arrows and took aim with renewed malice in their eyes; apparently not even the thought of killing their beloved Liam was enough to break them out of the witch's spell. In a flash, Kilika leapt back behind the line of fire, moving fast enough to leave an afterimage in her wake. It was plain to see her physical abilities were worthy of her rank.

"Amelia, Night! Stay close to me!" I whispered brusquely.

"Are you sure about this, Master?" asked Night.

I didn't answer. I simply reached out my hand in front of me.

"Loose!" screamed the archers—but it was too late.

"Shadow Magic, activate!"

Shadow Magic worked by multiplying and amplifying the existing shadows in a surrounding area. With fewer obstacles and natural shadows here compared to down in the labyrinth, I had to focus far more of my energy than I had required during our battle with Night. But as long as I could encompass the four of us, I knew we'd be fine. The veil formed from our collective shadows wriggled and writhed, creating a forcefield that swallowed up each and every arrow rained down upon us. At last, silence fell over the clearing once more.

"In all my years as a gold-rank adventurer, felling countless foes and the strongest of adversaries, I've never seen magic like that before... Could it be an Extra Skill, perhaps?" Kilika mused as her fellow elves looked on in befuddlement. She seemed less fazed by the spell and more intrigued. Her rank clearly wasn't just for show. "Now then... I suppose it's my turn, isn't it?"

Just as my shadows were licking their lips in anticipation of a second course, a new voice rang out over the plaza, both dignified and powerful.

"Stand down, both of you!"

These words, which were boosted by a powerful Roar skill, stopped me dead in my tracks. Standing on a branch of the tallest tree on the periphery of the clearing was a tall, regal man. This man, who I could tell had an imposing presence even from afar, jumped down once

we'd obeyed his command to cease, then leapt across the field directly to Kilika's side in a single bound. This acrobatic acuity alone told me everything I needed to know about his combat prowess.

This man was a king. Not a craven, scheming king like the one in Retice, but the sort of king everyone envisioned upon hearing the word. He wore no ostentatious crown upon his head, nor did he exude the refined air and mild temperament of a Japanese emperor or empress. He was the type of man both immediately intimidating and likable at the same time, who you could tell was ready to lay down the law and make tough decisions at the drop of a hat whenever needed.

"F-Father?" whispered Kilika, incredulous.

"Careful, Akira," Amelia warned, slipping off Night's back. "There's a good chance he's under the influence of her Mesmerize skill as well..."

So this man with the kingly aura was Amelia and Kilika's father. I found Amelia's warning a bit hard to believe. I couldn't imagine a man that seemed so firm and resolute falling victim to Kilika's wiles.

"No, Father... Surely the spell can't have already worn off..." muttered Kilika.

"Kilika, what is the meaning of this? What are you trying to do to Amelia?"

"I-I was just..." Kilika faltered, trembling beneath her father's icy glare.

What was going on here? Was he truly not under the effects of Mesmerize? Or was Kilika just making it look that way so that we would let our guards down? I turned to Amelia hoping for an explanation, but she didn't notice my gaze. She simply stared straight at the ground, perhaps still stunned from her father's Roar. I was impressed she'd been able to warn me in her state. Many of the elven archers were knocked out cold from the shock of it, so the fact that Amelia was still able to speak was a testament to her fortitude. The king's ability to render people unconscious with a single Roar made me wonder if perhaps he was the true champion of the elves, not Kilika. I gave up on my attempt to get Amelia's attention and looked to the king instead.

"I'll only ask nicely one more time. What exactly have you been doing to your sister?"

“That villain is no sister of mine,” Kilika insisted. But I saw the fear in her eyes. If she was so afraid of her father, then why didn’t she just lie and deny any wrongdoing? That was what I would have done in her shoes, surely. My mother could be awfully terrifying when she was upset.

“Really, now. I thought you were better than this, Kilika,” the king responded, his disappointment painted clearly across his face.

Kilika recoiled from the shock of his disdain. She could only stand there and watch as he turned away and walked over to the sister she so despised. I almost felt for Kilika in that moment, though perhaps it was only because she so closely resembled Amelia, and I couldn’t bear to see Amelia looking so crestfallen. The king approached us and knelt to make eye contact with Amelia, paying no mind to the muck as it stained his fine robe.

“Amelia, my sweet daughter...”

Like a switch had been flipped, his eyes went from spiteful to apologetic. He looked at Amelia as though she were the king and he were a criminal begging for his life, or like a husband who’d just been caught cheating.

Not that I would know what that looks like.

At last, Amelia raised her head and looked into her father’s eyes.

“I’m so sorry for the way I’ve treated you, my child,” he said as their eyes met, before lowering his head in shame. At this, both daughters’ eyes opened wide, and scandalized murmurs broke out among the surrounding elves. His majestic air was now all but gone, replaced with the subdued demeanor of a gentle father. “It was unthinkable of me to banish you from your home and send you out into the wide world all alone. I let my rage consume me; I was not in my right mind. Your sister’s Mesmerize ability turned me into someone I am not...but that is no excuse. I am a failure, both as a father and a king.”

He bowed his head even deeper to show his regret.

“Why...?” she said, wide-eyed and incredulous.

I couldn’t blame her. This was probably the first time she’d ever seen her father put himself in such a vulnerable position.

Reading the room, Night and I decided to keep our mouths shut

on the sidelines. We might as well have been invisible. But this situation *did* affect us. If Amelia decided to stay here with her family in the elven domain, our little party would be a hell of a lot weaker for it. While we hadn't needed it (thankfully), her Resurrection Magic was a great boon to have on any perilous quest—almost like an insurance policy. It meant we were able to take on powerful foes while safe in the knowledge she could bring us back to life if the worst happened.

That being said, if Amelia decided she wanted to stay here, I wasn't about to stop her. And what sane person would choose risking life and limb on the demon continent over staying home and reconnecting with their family? Hell, I'd forget all about the Demon Lord if I had the choice, but the brief glimpses into the future I'd seen when I used World Eyes led me to believe that wasn't my decision to make; it seemed this world was doomed to meet its end if I didn't make the journey to the Demon Lord's castle myself. It was entirely possible my efforts wouldn't change the outcome and the world would end regardless, but it was still better than not trying at all...or so I thought.

Yes, the fleeting glimpses of the future I'd seen showed a world where a single imposing figure stood atop a mountain of corpses under a pitch-black sky. It was a hellscape through and through. Who that figure was, I couldn't say, but I do remember seeing my friend Asahina Kyousuke among the corpses. That alone gave me reason enough to fight.

I was growing increasingly concerned for my classmates. The longer I thought about it, the more I realized something *very* fishy had been going on in the Kingdom of Retice. They'd specifically told us ordinary people in this world rarely broke 100 in the Attack stat, and not even their mightiest warriors could reach 500. I hadn't tested out World Eyes back then, so I couldn't say for sure, but I was confident every single person in that castle had well over 100 Attack—the king, the knights, that old codger, even the maids. Perhaps the only exception would be the princess, whose physical stats would be lower in favor of magic stats. So why did the old man lie to us, then? I felt increasingly stupid for ever having believed a word he said, especially after I'd resented my classmates for doing the same.

After all, it was only a matter of time before the hero and his companions would depart the castle to slay the Demon Lord. If the royals were really planning to send them on such a quest, then it made no sense to lie about it. Not when my classmates would discover the lie

the moment they ran into any other band of adventurers out in the world and saw how strong they were. Maybe the princess could have brainwashed them into ignoring it using her curse crystals, but that wasn't what the princess's curse did. I knew now it was designed to slowly eat away at her victims' mental states and amplify their most negative emotions. Being summoned to another world was a stressful thing, after all, even when blessed with incredible powers. There was no doubt that all of us were dealing with negative emotions, myself included.

In many ways, her curse was less of a curse and more a form of mind control. That's why our disenchanter with the Kansai accent had so much trouble breaking it. By all accounts, our group was incredibly overpowered, even from the outset, so a simple curse should have been a cinch to break. I wouldn't be surprised if my classmates had started a civil war among themselves back at the castle by now due to the effects of that mind control.

"...ira... Akira!"

Snapping back to reality, I lifted my head to see Amelia staring at me with concern. *Guess I must've let my mind wander a little too far. Didn't have much time to think these things through down in the labyrinth, so my brain's playing catch-up now that we're safe on solid ground.*

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry about that."

I looked around and discovered the king of the elves was watching me as well; those were the eyes of a father who'd just had his daughter stolen...or what I assumed that would look like, anyway. I hadn't done any stealing of daughters myself. He was smiling amiably, not wanting to make Amelia mad, but I could tell he was judging me. It was obvious he did not want his daughter associating with a lowlife like me, and I honestly appreciated that he was being so upfront about it. I much preferred it when I could tell at a glance exactly how someone felt about me.

"And your relationship to my Amelia is...what, exactly?" he asked at last, with the icy tone of a howling blizzard.

I decided it was probably best to be honest with him.

"We've known each other for about a week now. Though most of that time's been spent fumbling around together in the dark, running

ourselves ragged until we're too exhausted to keep going and we both pass out on the cold, hard ground. I have to admit, I've never met a girl with an appetite like your daughter's, sir, but I dare say I've done my best to keep her satisfied."

The king's eyes widened in horror. Though he was trying very hard to maintain his smile, the corners of his mouth were twitching like mad, and Amelia's expression was much the same.

"A-Akira! Don't say it like *that*! You're going to give him the wrong idea! ...Though you definitely *have* been keeping me pretty satisfied," she whispered bashfully.

Upon hearing this, the king dropped all pretense, and his forced smile vanished without a trace.

"Akira, was it?"

"Yes, sir."

"I hereby challenge you to a duel."

"Uh. What?"

Why had it come to this? I shot a glance over at Kilika. *What about her? She doesn't have a lick of remorse for what she's done. Shouldn't you focus on reprimanding her first?*

"My daughter tells me she wishes to continue accompanying you on your journey, and into the land of the demons, no less," the king explained. I looked over at Amelia, both surprised and confused. I knew that was what she'd wanted to do *before*, but I assumed she'd probably choose to stay home now that she'd made amends with her father.

Amelia shook her head, perhaps having read my mind.

"It's okay. I already made up my mind to go with you, and I'm sticking to it."

I get that, but your old man looks like he's about to blow a gasket here. Are you sure this is really what you want to do? I asked her in my mind, but it seemed she wouldn't budge. I'd come to learn that Amelia could be quite the stubborn young lady—once she'd made up her mind about something, she never changed it unless you presented a very, very compelling argument.

"A-anyway, Akira, do you know why my father isn't under the influence of Kilika's Mesmerize skill anymore?"

“Nope, I sure don’t.”

I could tell she was trying desperately to change the subject and I decided to just go along with it. Behind her, her father’s face was getting redder and redder with rage, and I was struggling not to laugh, so I was happy to have a lecture to distract me. Amelia looked around at all the elven soldiers surrounding us, their eyes still full of hatred for her.

“Well, it’s because my father’s stats are very high, even if they’re not quite as high as Kilika’s. He’s probably the only person in the elven domain who can pose a real challenge to her,” she explained, fixing her gaze back on me. “And your stats are even higher than Kilika’s, which is the reason her Mesmerize didn’t work on you at all. The higher your stats, the more resistant you are to spells like Mesmerize, and anyone with stats higher than the caster’s will be immune to its effects entirely. My best guess is that my father broke free from the spell because Kilika got careless and forgot to reapply it. Spells like Mesmerize don’t last forever, after all. I assume Kilika’s been reapplying it on a daily basis to prevent this, but when she heard I’d returned to the Sacred Forest, she probably got distracted and forgot to do so. Am I right...?”

Kilika scoffed.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” said Amelia, staring defiantly back at her sister’s malicious gaze. I was impressed at how much stronger she seemed. It was a stark contrast to the girl who’d curled up in fear under very same gaze not even an hour ago. I wondered what she and her father had talked about while I was daydreaming.

“Gotcha. Well, thanks for the primer, I guess. But back to the topic at hand: Why are you so insistent on coming with me to the land of the demons?” I asked, pivoting the conversation back on course for fear of her father’s wrath. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy to have you, but you do realize we might not make it back, right?”

“Because I know that’s what *you* want, Akira...” she responded, clearly unhappy I’d thwarted her attempt to avoid the issue. “You need my Resurrection Magic, and I know I can trust you not to betray me, because you’re immune to Kilika’s spell. But more than anything, I just want to be with you, and stay by your side. Now and forever.”

It felt almost like I was being proposed to. Amelia looked up at me with watery eyes, her hands clasped together at her bosom. Though we were about the same height, so perhaps saying she “looked up” was a

bit of an exaggeration. But I knew from our time together down in the labyrinth that this was her go-to pose whenever she resorted to begging in order to get her way. She knew I was weak to her soulful eyes, and I'd given up many a bite of monster meat to her as a result.

"Sure, that's fine with me. But if you ever wanna actually leave on this adventure, just the two of us, you're gonna have to do something about your dad and sister first," I said, pointing a thumb back over my shoulder in their direction. Her sister was glaring at her in almost the exact same way her father was glaring at me.

"Just the two of you? I think you're forgetting someone, Master. Or am I chopped liver?" asked Night, chiming in for the first time in what felt like ages.

"Er, oh yeah... Whoops?" I shrugged, embarrassed. I had, in fact, forgotten about him, but I would never admit it lest I hurt the big cat's feelings. I had to hand it to him, though—he'd single-handedly shattered the tension in the air, and even the king seemed mildly amused. Perhaps because it was a joke at my expense.

As we all were growing tired of standing around in a field, we agreed to continue our negotiations back at the castle—or the elven equivalent of a castle, I suppose. It was a large, formidable structure built at the base of the Holy Tree, though "grown" might have been a better way to describe it. The large, multitiered fortress was made from interlocking trees, grown in specific ways to form interconnected, nest-like rooms and corridors. It was a bit difficult to describe, and there was little to shield its occupants from the rain aside from natural canopy cover, but apparently an ancient skill passed down from ruler to ruler allowed the king to control the weather. I briefly considered asking the king to teach me this skill—being drenched by a sudden downpour was one of my least favorite feelings in the world.

"You have my thanks for returning Amelia safely to her homeland, but you have still technically trespassed in elven territory. Have you anything to say for yourselves?" asked the king from his seat at the head of a long table, his hands folded in front of him. He seemed far calmer than he had, though the same couldn't be said for Kilika, seated by his side and staring us down.

"Before I answer that, I wanna know why *she's* allowed to sit at the negotiation table with us," I retorted, pointing an accusatory finger

at Kilika. Even if she was a princess, she was still guilty of brainwashing a monarch and driving her sister out of the country. I wasn't expecting her to get thrown in prison or anything, but it did seem like the sort of crime for which a punishment was in order. I said as much, and the king narrowed his eyes and smiled.

"Oh, don't you worry. Kilika will get what's coming to her. I know—perhaps I'll recount her most embarrassing childhood stories to the room!" he chuckled, shooting her a quick glance. I didn't know what embarrassing stories a so-called perfect child could have racked up, but they apparently existed, as she hung her head low and her cheeks went bright red.

"You're kidding, right?" I shook my head. I only asked because I assumed there must be some sort of reason for her presence in the room, but the king's dismissive response only made me question his aptitude as both a ruler and a father. Did he really think embarrassment was a suitable punishment for what she'd done?

"If Amelia truly decides she has no intention of coming home, then the line of succession defaults to Kilika. As such, I'm afraid I cannot sentence her with a punishment that befits her crime. I'm sure it must be frustrating to see foul deeds go unpunished, but that's just the way it goes in royal dynasties. For what it's worth, it seems she's learned just how boring it can be to have all my subjects at her beck and call, obeying her every word through the use of oppressive force. I think this will serve as a good lesson for her in what it means to be an honest ruler. And she has assured me that all of the citizenry will be freed from the effects of her spell come the morrow."

You're really gonna entrust the throne to a wack job like her? Why don't you just find a decent, upstanding guy to be her husband and let him handle the ruling?

I wasn't ready to let Kilika win that easily, but before I could make any further objections, I was stopped short by the last person I expected to let her off the hook.

"That's enough, Akira. Just let it go."

"Amelia?"

She grabbed me by the arm and gently shook her head. Her eyes were dead.

"I'm used to it by now. I'm a Child of Blight. I was never worthy

of my father's love. No matter how many times he might apologize to me for the things she's done, he'll still always take her side in the end. That's just the way it's always been."

"And why the hell is that...?" I asked. I could feel myself growing more impatient. Kilika was now grinning smugly, and the king looked like he wanted nothing to do with this conversation.

"Kilika and I are twins," she continued, staring down at the ground. "In elven culture, it's said that twins are an ill omen that can only bring blight and ruin unto the land. Whenever twins are born to an elven mother and father, one or both of them will always bring great calamity to the world."

What a cruel superstition to believe in. Children don't choose the manner of their birth, I thought to myself. But I remained quiet and let her finish.

"One of every pair of elven twins will always be born with hair and eyes colored differently from their siblings and parents. As you can see, Kilika has my father's golden hair and azure eyes, while I have silver hair and red eyes. They say this is the mark of the blight—a sign that a child will bring nothing but death and disease to the Sacred Forest. My face may resemble my mother's just as much as hers does, but I bear the mark while she does not. I should have been killed at birth, in all honesty, but my father wouldn't allow it. They say he went to great lengths to ensure that I, a Child of Blight, would be allowed to live among the other elves like a normal girl. And for that, I'll always be grateful to him."

The king looked over at Amelia, his face expressionless. Though I saw no hint of emotion in his eyes, I could certainly understand a father's desire to let his daughter live, even if he knew that doing so would only bring misfortune in the long run. As far as I could tell, he did genuinely love her. If anything, he seemed a bit *too* protective. If he didn't love her, would he have come running the moment he heard Amelia had returned to the forest? Would he have gotten as furious as he did when Kilika tried to kill her? Would he have swallowed his dignity before his royal retainers and apologized to her as he had?

I couldn't understand the logic behind Amelia's thought process—and not just because I was a thick-headed idiot. I could only attribute it to our vastly different life experiences; our minds had subsequently also developed in vastly different ways. Or was there more to it...?

There was, perhaps, one other possibility. But I had no evidence to support the hypothesis at the moment, so I'd have to do a little digging before I could say for sure.

"Hey, Amelia. Do you remember the kind of person I said I hate more than any other?" I asked.

Amelia looked confused as to where on earth this question was coming from, but she nodded regardless. It was one of the first conversations we'd had down in the labyrinth.

"Yeah. You said you hate so-called 'perfect' people, right? What about it?"

I turned my gaze toward Kilika.

"Well, you told me your sister was a perfect little princess, but if you ask me, she's anything but. Honestly, she might be the most defective person I've ever met."

"Wh-what?!" Kilika sputtered. "Me, defective?! How *dare* you! Know your place, you filthy little worm!" she screamed, hysterical.

See, that's what I'm talking about. You've got a defective personality, toots, and if I were you, I'd ask for a refund.

"Amelia, you told me your parents didn't love you, but it looks to me like your father loves you very much. Maybe even a little too much. So I don't understand how you ever came up with the idea that you were hated by your own family. She's daddy's little girl, isn't she?"

"I'm going to squash you like a bug later, boy," said the king at last, his cheeks bright red.

Ooh, scary. Don't worry, old man. No need to be embarrassed just because I've got your number. But I ignored him and finished my thought.

"Anyway, I have no idea what could've happened to make you feel that way, but that's just the impression that I get."

I wasn't a mind reader like Amelia, so I couldn't know everything, but something told me there was a reason behind all of this.

"But didn't you see how Kilika used Mesmerize to exile me from the forest? She even tried to have her archers impale me with their arrows..." Amelia argued.

"Come to think of it, we never did have that duel, did we?" the king interrupted.

“Seriously? You’re bringing this up now? Are you kidding me?” I groaned.

At this reproach, the king once again sat up straight, regaining his stalwart composure. I wasn’t fooled, even if I *was* impressed at how quickly he could change tack.

“We have a score to settle regarding Amelia,” he said. “Should you win, I shall leave her in your care, but should we win, Amelia stays right here. And don’t think that flimsy magic trick you used earlier will cut it this time. I refuse to entrust my daughter to a weakling.”

Amelia shivered at her father’s icy tone. I squinted in frustration. For a minute there, I’d really thought he was going to leave the decision of Amelia’s fate to Amelia herself, but it seemed he’d changed his mind at the last moment. *How annoying. Does this guy think he gets his way all the time just because he’s king? No, he just doesn’t wanna give up his precious little girl. It’s time to let your daughter be her own person, papa bear.*

“And who will be my opponent? You?” I asked.

“No. Kilika will fight as my proxy. And as I’m sure Amelia’s already told you, she’s a gold-rank adventurer in the Adventurers’ Guild—a distinction that only three others in the entire world enjoy. I take it you agree to this duel, Kilika?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Good. Now, what say you, boy?”

Oh, you couldn’t have picked a better opponent, I thought, returning the king’s smile with a smirk of my own. *I look forward to putting her in her place.*

“Then the duel shall begin shortly. We will be waiting for you back down in the plaza. If you give in to cowardice and flee the country instead, just leave Amelia behind and let her convey your craven surrender.”

I couldn’t help but feel like this king had the makings of a convincing villain as I watched him stride pompously out of the meeting room with Kilika in tow. *Man, what have I gotten myself into? What if I misjudged her abilities and I’m in way over my head?*

“You’ll do just fine, Akira. I know you can beat her,” Amelia reassured me.

“Hey, Amelia. Can I tell you something?” I asked, suddenly feeling oddly compelled.

“What is it?”

“I think I like you. As in, I *like*-like you.”

“Huh...?!”

Apparently, I’d caught Amelia completely off guard, as she cocked her head in confusion, but judging from the way her face immediately went crimson, I knew she understood what I meant.

I’ll interpret that as a favorable response. I brought my face closer to hers.

“Do you like me too?” I whispered.

“Wh—Akira, what in the world has gotten into you?” she sputtered, placing her hands over her chest as I stared deep into her eyes. Her heart had to be pounding like crazy. Maybe even torturously so.

“Well, I just figured that, y’know... Things are probably gonna get pretty hectic for us here real soon, so I wanted to say it now while I still had the chance.”

Honestly, I didn’t really know where this all was coming from, but something inside was telling me that I might not get another chance. If I lost to Kilika, for example, then I might never see Amelia ever again. Not that I had any intention of losing, mind you.

After a long silence, Amelia finally raised her head. Upon seeing she was beet red, I couldn’t help but crack up, and she covered her face with her hands. A few moments passed, until finally she peeked through the gaps in her fingers and answered my question in a soft, creaky voice.

“I...I guess I...I-like you...t-too...”

“Cool. Thanks for saying so. Now I feel like I could take on the world.”

I didn’t blush or feel sheepish upon hearing her confession, because I’d known she’d had a crush on me for a while now. I might have been summoned to a trope-tastic fantasy world, but I wasn’t as dense as your average high school rom-com protagonist. I ruffled her hair, but that only made her face turn an even deeper red. I wanted to

wrap my arms around her and squeeze her tight, but I restrained myself. Feeling newly reinvigorated for the battle to come, I laid all the weapons I had on hand out on the long table.

“Let’s see here... I’ve got a few throwing knives, the rope I picked up back in the labyrinth, my trusty katana, and a few small mana stones I could throw. Other than that, I guess it’ll just be a question of how well I can use Shadow Magic and Conceal Presence in tandem...but I think I’ll manage. Plenty of tools at my disposal.”

I re-equipped my weapons and turned to look at Amelia, whose face was still redder than a ripe tomato.

“You’re not gonna be mad if I rough your sister up a little bit, are you?” I asked.

“Nope. Thanks, Akira.”

“For what?”

“For fighting on my behalf, silly. And against my psychotic sister, no less.”

She smiled softly.

Amelia rarely broke from her usual earnest expression, but on the rare occasion that she did smile, she was absolutely radiant. I was reminded of all the times I’d seen the female lead in a manga beg the hero not to go off and fight on their behalf, yet here Amelia was, doing the exact opposite. Though she was far cuter and had a far more attractive personality than any one-dimensional heroine. She shone like a star, especially next to a guy like me, who probably fell near the lower end of the bell curve in terms of physical attractiveness.



“Well, you’re quite welcome. Oh, but I do have one favor I’d like to ask in return.”

“What is it?”

I leaned in close and whispered my request in Amelia’s ear. There was no one else in the room, but I didn’t know who might be listening in from outside.

“You think you can do that for me?” I asked after pulling away. “It shouldn’t be too hard, I don’t think. And you can wear gloves if you don’t feel comfortable touching it with your bare hands.”

“Yeah, I’ll definitely want to wear gloves, but I think I can handle it. I might need a little while though. I’ll leave now and try to bring it back as soon as I can,” she promised.

“Awesome. I’ll be counting you... Night?”

“*On it*,” said the cat, immediately understanding that I wanted him to accompany Amelia on her little covert mission.

Leaving them to take care of my final preparations, I sat down and ran through some hypothetical battle scenarios in my mind as I waited for them to get back. While I was fairly certain I wouldn’t lose, I figured I should still mentally prepare myself as best I could and let the chips fall where they may. When Amelia and Night returned from their mission, the three of us headed back down to the plaza where Kilika and her father waited.

“You certainly took your sweet time. Though perhaps I should commend you for having the courage to show up at all,” Kilika said upon our arrival.

“Thanks, but I don’t need your commendations. I’ll get all the praise I need from Amelia after I wipe the floor with you,” I shot back.

A large square stage about a hundred fifty feet across was now set up in the middle of the clearing, surrounded on all sides by a large crowd of elven onlookers. I assumed it had been made by an earth mage. They were really planning to make a spectacle out of this, weren’t they? Though it probably wasn’t every day that the crown princess herself agreed to a duel, so it was understandable.

Kilika stood atop the platform with her arms folded, looking down

at us as if she'd been ready and waiting for hours. I told Amelia to go stand next to the king, then stepped onto the platform and stood directly across from Kilika.

"How very sweet. So you finally recognize that you've fallen head over heels into my sister's clutches, do you?" Kilika asked spitefully.

"Nah, I've known it for a while now, actually. We just confessed our feelings to each other, though. But hey, glad to know you support our relationship," I said sarcastically.

"My, my. How lucky she is to be loved by such a dashing gentleman. If only my father would stop being such a stick in the mud and let you whisk her away from my sight forevermore!" She laughed condescendingly before drawing the rapier sheathed at her waist. It was thin enough to be a fencing saber, but its distinctive double-edged shape was unmistakable.

I grabbed Yato-no-Kami and held it aloft, but without unsheathing it. Instead, I wrapped the black scarf I always wore over the hilt and handguard to ensure it would remain firmly in its sheath, which was uniquely sturdy for a katana and could surely parry a thin blade like hers without issue. There still wasn't a single crack on it, even after all the use it had seen down in the labyrinth, and I was certain that wouldn't change today.

Kilika squinted at me, trying to gauge what I was playing at.

"So you don't want to injure me, is that it? Don't patronize me, fool. This is a *duel to the death*. I will be coming at you with the intent to kill."

"That's fine, but I won't be doing the same. Amelia would be awfully sad if you died."

"Could you please not make a mockery of this crown-sanctioned duel just because you don't want to hurt my sister's 'feelings'?"

"Sorry, but those are my terms. I'm not gonna turn my blade on her flesh and blood, and you won't convince me otherwise."

I braced my sheathed blade for combat, and Kilika held hers out straight with an underhanded grip at chest height. It was the best posture for thrusting, especially with a sword like hers, but I assumed she was doing it mostly for dramatic effect. There was no guarantee she'd actually open with a straight thrust. We locked eyes, each of us

sizing up the other and blocking out everything else.

At last, the king cleared his throat and announced the terms of the bout.

“In the name of the royal family, I do hereby sanction this duel between Kilika Rosequartz and Akira Oda over the fate of my daughter Amelia. The duel shall continue until one of you is unable to fight, falls from the boundaries of the arena, or surrenders. The use of all magics is prohibited. You may use only your regular skills and techniques in order to claim victory. If it is determined that either of you have used magic despite these rules, you will be immediately disqualified.”

The king looked around to ensure everyone was in agreement.

I see. So the audience of elves is also here to watch for any foul play. From what I could tell, they were all completely enamored with Kilika, perhaps because her Mesmerize spell hadn't worn off yet. The “referees” wouldn't be making any calls in my favor. I didn't mind. I had no intention of cheating.

“You can do it, Akira!” cried Amelia.

As long as I had her in my corner, I knew I'd do just fine. I closed my eyes and waited for the king to give the signal.

“Let the duel begin!”

As soon as the words left his lips, I opened my eyes and leapt. Like a flash of lightning, the match was over in a single instant.

“N-no... It can't be...” Kilika muttered in horror.

“Nothing personal, toots. But I've got bigger fish to fry, and I need your sister's help.”

“H-how could I lose...to a filthy commoner like you...?!”

I'd rammed the sheath of my blade deep into Kilika's stomach, knocking the wind out of her. She fell, unconscious, to her knees. I caught her with my free hand before she actually hit the ground.

“Whew. I'd say that about does it, wouldn't you?”

I looked around to see all of the other elves (including the king) frozen in place, mouths agape in amazement, almost as if time had stood still. Only Amelia was clapping to applaud my victory, beaming.

“Hey, Your Majesty. Can we get a verdict, please?” I asked impatiently.

“Th-the duel goes to the challenger, Akira Oda!” he finally proclaimed.

That’s more like it.

Upon hearing this announcement, however, the elves in the crowd murmured in disbelief.

“Wait. He actually knocked out Princess Kilika?”

“No way. He must’ve cheated somehow.”

“Of course he cheated, you idiot! Princess Kilika is invincible! She’d never lose to a chump like him.”

“Your Majesty, we, your loyal subjects, feel strongly that this duel was not won in good faith. Should you not rescind your ruling and order a rematch?”

The peanut gallery seemed quite unhappy with my decisive victory, and they didn’t hesitate to make their opinions known. I must’ve moved too quickly for many of them to even see what happened, but I was sure there were plenty of more experienced elven witnesses who knew I’d won the match fair and square. Ignoring the naysayers, I approached the king.

“Now then. I’ll be taking Amelia with me, if you don’t mind. After you answer a few questions for me, that is.”

“Y-yes, of course,” the king responded absentmindedly, still dazed.

I laid Kilika’s unconscious body down at his feet, though not before making note of how her smaller chest size made her a bit lighter than Amelia. *Didn’t think breasts made much of a difference in that regard, but I guess I was wrong.*

“W-wait, no!” sputtered the king. “Just one minute! My eyes still refuse to believe what I just witnessed. Kilika is one of the four elite adventurers of Morigan. How in the world did you best her? Where did you get such...such power?” he asked in disbelief, finally snapping back to his senses upon seeing Kilika lying limp.

I had already started walking toward Amelia.

“Akira, were you thinking naughty thoughts again?” she asked accusingly.

“Nope. Not sure where you got that idea,” I lied.

“Okay, good.”

Before she had the chance to congratulate me on my victory, however, a veritable riot broke out behind us.

“Princess Kilika would never lose to an uncivilized human thug! Open your eyes, people! There’s no way he won that duel fair and square!”

This lone dissenter caused a whole new wave of discord to break out from the crowd. Thinking his voice sounded familiar, I was amazed to see it was the same man I’d taken hostage earlier, screaming at the foot of the stage. *Awfully bold of him to imply that I’m the one who likes to play dirty, especially after he tried to snipe Amelia dead with a poison arrow from up a tree. Guess some people have no self-awareness.*

“What exactly was unfair about it, Liam?” Amelia asked, looking at the man with a resentful glare. I could tell she was trying to force a self-assured smile, but she was obviously immensely angry with him.

Right, Liam. That was his name. For some reason I could never remember the names of frustratingly attractive men (the hero included). In any case, Amelia had clearly learned to assert herself, which was great, and this Liam fellow faltered at her response. She was not the type of person you ever wanted to cross—especially when she hadn’t eaten in a while. I was just about to hop down from the platform on the opposite side of the arena when he finally responded.

“So he’s pulled the wool over your eyes, too, has he?” Liam spat back. “I suppose I should expect nothing less from a Child of Blight. I always tried to believe you were better than this, Amelia. But it seems you really are just a worthless sack of flesh whose only purpose is to bring ruin and misfortune to everyone around you.”

These words flipped a switch in my brain, and my mind filled with nothing but a white-hot fury. I whirled around, grabbed Liam by the collar, and dragged him up onto the stage. Perhaps I was a bit too rough, as he spent the next few moments coughing up a storm on his hands and knees. I didn’t care. I drove my foot into his gut from below and spun him onto his back so that he was looking up at me.

The moment he saw my face, he squealed in fear. *Wow, that’s not very nice. Surely I’m not that ugly.* All I’d done was use Intimidate and rough him up a little bit; was it really necessary to bring my looks into it? Though in fairness, it *had* been an awfully long time since I’d felt such a seething rage toward another person, so I probably did look pretty scary.

The last time I could remember snapping like this was back in junior high, when some creep tried to molest my sister, Yui, on the train. I tracked the scumbag down and beat the shit out of him. I had to be dragged away by a group of bystanders. Word of the incident made it back to my mom and the school, and we were forced to go apologize to the man, but after we made it home, my mom congratulated me for doing the right thing, and Yui gave me a big ol' bear hug. Despite my mother's poor bill of health, she wasn't the type to let people go unpunished, and my sister had clearly been a little traumatized. After that, my classmates teased me relentlessly for the remainder of junior high, calling me an overprotective brother and even implying that I must've had the hots for my sister to pop off and go feral on the guy. But that was just the cross I had to bear for losing my temper, and I resigned myself to it. Even I knew I'd probably gone a little bit overboard, but that was ancient history.

I should probably figure out what this guy's deal is before I beat him to a pulp, shouldn't I?

"Hey, Amelia. What's your relationship to this punk? Or is he just one of your sister's lackeys?" I asked.

Amelia mulled this over for a moment before deciding how to answer.

"Well, he *was* my fiancé. And we were inseparable back when we were children. But Kilika used Mesmerize to steal him away from me, so now he's *her* fiancé."

"Well, well. So you're Amelia's ex, eh?" I asked the man. I had to admit, the thought of a man like him marrying her infuriated me more, even if it had ultimately been called off. But Amelia was mine now. "Now, remind me. What was all that bullshit you were saying about her a minute ago?"

"Eeeeeeeek!"

Liam was clearly too terrified to have a sensible conversation at the moment. I shrugged and looked back over my shoulder at Amelia. I asked her jokingly if my face was really that scary, to which she replied it was. This was, admittedly, not the answer I'd been hoping for or expecting.

"Well, whatever. If you're that unhappy with the results of the duel, then I'd be happy to duel you or a proxy of your choosing to prove

I won fair and square,” I said to Liam. “Surely then you’d acknowledge my victory, no?”

I was trying my best to control my temper and behave like a rational gentleman. That was getting harder and harder to do the longer he refused to answer my questions. He was still lying there at my feet. Maybe I’d overdone it with Intimidate and he was literally unable to get back up. That alone should have been evidence enough that I was too powerful for anyone here to match, but the elven audience still wasn’t having it. Thus it was decided that there would be another duel to prove to my victory was legitimate. Kilika still hadn’t regained consciousness, which I found odd, as I had been careful not to hit her too hard. Perhaps I’d misjudged my own strength—or maybe she was faking it because she was too embarrassed to face her own loss.

POV: LIAM GLADIOLUS

“**L**ORD LIAM, let me be your proxy!”

“No, let me! I’ll make that dirty rotten human wish he’d never been born!”

“He must pay for disrespecting our future queen and goddess! As Her Highness’s fiancé’s highest-ranking attendant, it should be I that takes him to task!”

As my vassals gathered around me and raised their voices to demand the right to defend my honor, I said nothing and simply closed my eyes. My memories of the past few weeks and months spun in my head like a raging whirlpool, and something about the things my servants said didn’t seem quite right to me.

Were they truly talking about me? *I* was Princess Kilika’s fiancé? But I thought Princess Amelia was my betrothed. Though the common folk loved to spread rumors about her behind her back and say she’d only bring calamity to the forest, she never let them break her spirit, and she always tried to live life to the fullest. I thought her luminous silver hair and striking red eyes made her a beautiful treasure. Princess Kilika, for her part, was quite the fair maiden as well, and a powerful warrior to boot, but she couldn’t hold a candle to her sister as far as I was concerned.

So then why was my mind flooded with visions of Princess Amelia being ousted from the elven domain on spurious charges—and of myself pledging to marry Princess Kilika? Why was the image of her twisted smile as she made a toast to our engagement gnawing at my brain?

Wait! I remember!

Princess Kilika had approached me one day and said her sister wished for me to come meet her in the plaza, so I’d made my way there posthaste. But as I waited, she never appeared, and just when I was about to give up and head home, Princess Kilika showed up and stole a kiss from my lips. Too stunned to react and too weak to resist her superior stats and shake her off...from that day forward, my mind had been filled with thoughts of her and her alone.

“Yes, I remember everything now... Oh, dear god—what have I done?”

Oh, forgive me, Princess Amelia! This is all my fault for being unable to see your sister for the psychopath she truly is!

From the day I was Mesmerized, my feelings for Princess Kilika had grown deeper and deeper until my true self was drowned in an ocean of her. The lifeless husk that remained could do nothing save for her bidding. Together, we used this curse to spread her influence across the entire elven domain. Not even women and children could resist her charms. Soon, Kilika had all of the high elf nobility under her thumb, including the king. They all began to ignore Princess Amelia and treat her with greater and greater disdain. It was a full reversal of the way they'd treated the twins when they were children—only they'd never intentionally treated Princess Kilika as the lesser sibling. They'd simply paid *too much* attention to Princess Amelia, which had left little to spare for Kilika.

Princess Kilika was no less worthy of love and attention, to be sure, but she couldn't hope to match the novelty of her sister's beautiful silver hair and fiery red eyes, which made her stand out from every other elf in the forest. While a few of the older and more superstitious types clung to the tired tradition of denouncing these features as a mark of the blight, most younger elves didn't put much stock in old folk legends. To most elves, Amelia was the crown jewel of the royal family, and they couldn't get enough of her.

This special treatment didn't sit well with Princess Kilika, though the people *did* acknowledge her unique strengths as well. But where Princess Amelia was prized for her beauty and charisma, Princess Kilika excelled in swordplay and combat prowess. Not a day went by without them both being praised by the common folk for being the finest pair of sisters to ever grace the royal lineage. Princess Amelia was no slouch when it came to combat herself, though, and many claimed no one could rival her in magical ability. This, combined with her winning personality, made her the clear favorite among much of the citizenry.

Nevertheless, both sisters were cherished by the elven people as shimmering diamonds. And now it fell to me to stop Princess Kilika before she tarnished that gleam.

“I am grateful for your kind offers, my vassals...but I shall handle this myself.”

My mind was made up.

POV: ODA AKIRA

“**N**OW THEN. In the name of the royal family, I do hereby sanction this duel between Akira Oda and Liam Gladiolus. Duelists, take your positions!” ordered the king.

I reached over my shoulder and grabbed my katana, sheath and all, while Liam drew his bow. I couldn't read his facial expression from this distance, but he didn't seem offended by me leaving my sword in its sheath the way Kilika had been. He was focused on the duel to come, not even moving a muscle.

According to Amelia, he was a civil servant who detested the use of violence in all its forms. She said that, like most elves, he was quite skilled with a bow, but he couldn't wield a sword to save his life. He'd learned archery for the sake of hunting and had never once taken up a blade; perhaps it had something to do with the elves being a proud and dignified race who hated sullyng their hands with blood in close combat or some bunk like that.

So it would be a long-range archer versus a short-range assassin. This was not an advantageous arrangement for me.

I remembered fighting a giant porcupine thing on the seventy-fifth floor of the labyrinth, one capable of firing its venomous quills from a distance. Those things had messed up my hands something fierce. In the end, I bided my time dodging until the moment the beast was forced to reload, at which point I rushed in and slashed it clean in half. I figured I could use the same strategy here, though hopefully without the disembowelment part.

“Let the duel begin!” proclaimed the king.

An arrow immediately whizzed my way. I'd never tried deflecting projectiles with my sword before, but I managed to time my slash and bat it out of the air. *That works, I guess.* It didn't fly anywhere near as fast as that monster's quills, so the timing was surprisingly easy to grasp. But this was no time to be congratulating myself.

“You're gonna have to be faster than that, buddy,” I said, dashing behind my opponent as he fumbled for his next arrow. Before he had a

chance to knock it, I whacked him hard on the back of the neck with the sheath of my blade. *Whoops, sorry. I may have accidentally hit a little too hard because you're a pretty boy. Nothing personal, I just can't stand your kind. And no, I don't regret it one bit.*

Liam fell to the ground right then and there. I could have caught him with my free hand like I'd done for Kilika, but I decided not to, hoping the impact from the fall might break his nose, or at least scratch up his stupid pretty boy face a bit.

That's what you get for putting Amelia through hell, dickwad.

"The duel goes to the defending champion, Akira Oda," the king said unenthusiastically.

A hush fell over the crowd once again. Liam's three bumbling vassals dragged him down from the arena and carried him away, though not before giving me a few dirty looks. At a glance, it didn't seem like the impact had left a scratch on his perfect little face.

Maybe I should have socked him a few times after all. Way to screw up the most important part, Akira. But just as I was kicking myself for my mistakes, I noticed Liam had opened his eyes while being lugged away and was looking up at me. I was impressed he'd regained consciousness so quickly after a blow like that. Maybe he'd be better suited as a military officer than a civil servant. Then I noticed his lips were moving. He was trying to tell me something.

"You 'leave Amelia and Kilika in my capable hands'...? Gee, thanks for your blessing, bud. Lord knows I wouldn't know what to do without it," I sighed. I gave him a reassuring thumbs-up regardless.

This must have come as a relief to Liam, as he smiled before turning to his vassals and saying something else. The three who were carrying him looked like they were about to cry. Hell, one of them *was* crying.

In the end, I was the undisputed victor. Even if many of the elves still didn't want to accept the fact that I'd won, there wasn't anyone else they could pit against me; I'd already beaten Kilika, and she was their strongest warrior. Maybe they should have considered not putting all their combat eggs in the extremely specialized archery basket. Or maybe it was harder for them to accept defeat because they usually killed their prey from a distance without it having a chance to fight back.

More importantly, judging from Liam's final words, it seemed our trump card had worked its magic. As I thought back on the duel, Amelia came running over to the stage with a towel in hand.

"You did it, Akira! You broke Liam free from the effects of Mesmerize!"

"So it did work," I said, nodding as I opened my free hand. There in my right palm was a tiny piece of wood, which I'd been clutching in my non-sword-wielding hand since before the duel with Kilika began. This was what I'd sent Amelia and Night on a mission to retrieve—a single chip from the Holy Tree's sacred bark. When I grabbed Liam by the collar between the two matches, I'd pressed the wood chip up against his bare skin.

"Just like I explained back when we first teleported here, the Holy Tree's bark has the ability to repel all magical effects and curses," Amelia said. "I hadn't thought of using it to break the spell myself before I had to flee the country, yet you came up with the idea all by yourself in no time at all..."

I patted Amelia on the head. It couldn't have been easy for her to shave a chip off of the sacred tree her people cherished more than even their own lives. I'd told her to wear gloves so she wouldn't have to touch it with her bare hands, but even then, it's hard to violate religious customs you've adhered to since birth. I wanted to nuzzle and congratulate her on a job well done, but I restrained myself. I wanted to save that for when she did something she felt happy about achieving. She was awfully adorable when miffed, but she was cutest when she smiled.

She read this sentiment from my mind, then lowered her head and went red as a tomato.

"Akira, I think we need to see other people."

"Yeah, maybe so. I've been trying to make it work, but we just have too many compatibility issues, y'know?"

I played along with her sarcastic quip, but part of me truly felt a beautiful girl like her didn't belong with a guy like me. I crushed the wood chip into dust in my palm, then used a dash of everyday magic to send it flying on a gust of wind out across the entire plaza—so every last speck was sprinkled over the crowd.

"What the... What am I doing here?"

“Hey, what’s this big stage for?”

“Oh, look! It’s Princess Amelia!”

“Gosh, isn’t she just as beautiful as ever...”

“Princess Amelia! You’re looking quite nice today!”

Freed from the curse, the crowd of elves cheered in jubilation as they looked up at Amelia standing upon the stage. I turned to face her sister, who was now standing on the stage with us, clutching her sheathed rapier in her hand.

“Looks like all the love you stole from the populace is finally back where it belongs,” I said, and she gritted her teeth in anger. “What’s the matter, Kilika Rosequartz? I thought you promised your daddy you were gonna lift the spell anyway. Or was that just another one of your lies?”

“Silence, boy. What could *you* possibly know about me?” she asked, drawing her blade. I responded by holding up my weapon in kind and shielding Amelia behind me.

With a loud whoosh, Kilika kicked off the ground and came hurtling toward me at an impressive speed. The elves in the audience shrieked and ran away from the stage. I blocked her slash with ease, but this only infuriated her all the more. We clashed swords a few dozen times. Kilika could certainly hold her own, that was for sure, but while I was enjoying our little fencing match, it seemed like she was getting rather impatient.

“Winds, give me strength!” she cried, and Amelia shrieked as I turned and wrapped her in my arms.

“Wait, is that...Kilika’s elemental buff magic?! ...But I’ve only ever seen her use it once before, the time that dragon I told you about tried to burn down the Holy Tree!”

Elemental buff magic, eh? Finally busting out the big guns, I see. About damn time.

A tiny emerald tornado whirled around Kilika’s entire body, a smaller spiral enveloping her rapier. I assumed this added the element of wind to her attacks, which also gave her slashes a longer reach. I needed to be careful not to get too close. Also, if she was going to use magic, then so could I.

With a defiant smirk, I called upon the one trusty companion that

hadn't left my side since the moment I first set foot in this world—my shadow.

“Shadow Magic, activate!” I cried. There weren't a lot of other shadows to work with up on the flat stage, but I knew I could make do with just my own. “You wanna use buffs? That's fine with me. Time to give you a taste of your own medicine! Shadow-clad!”

I untied my black scarf from Yato-no-Kami and drew it from its sheath as my shadow crawled up my legs and spiraled around its blade. I'd successfully evened the playing field, and Kilika and I clashed swords once more—her wind-buffed rapier against my shadow-buffed katana.

The impact was intense and forced us both to recoil. My shadow had engulfed the brunt of the raging tempest swirling around her sword, so I was able to withstand the blow. If it hadn't been for my shadows, the sheer force of her wind would have sent me careening into the air along with the few elven onlookers still standing near the stage.

“Kilika! What do you think you're doing?!” Amelia screamed, reaching her hand out in protest of her sister's unthinkable actions. “Akira beat you fair and square! If you don't stop trying to fight him, then I'll fight you myself!”

Sorry, Amelia, but I can't let you do that, I whispered internally, before karate-chopping Amelia on the back of the neck to knock her out. I caught her limp body before she collapsed to the ground. *We don't have time to argue about this right now, and I don't want you to have to see this either. Not this battle, nor the depraved emotions your messed-up sister refuses to let go.*

“So tell me, Kilika Rosequartz: Why does your blade wail in desperation like a crying child?” I asked after ensuring Amelia was out.

This question had puzzled me since we first crossed swords during the duel. Commander Saran had told me that every blade carried the emotions of its wielder. From the greatest masters to the lowliest apprentices, every swordsman's swings revealed a little something about their true nature. At first, I'd assumed this girl just wasn't right in the head and never had been, but now I felt like I was finally beginning to understand.

I first experienced the phenomenon on around the sixtieth floor of the labyrinth, when we were fighting some rotten, zombified lich

enemies with weapons. My skill levels had been quite high by that point, and I noticed that every time our swords clashed, I felt their emotions through their blades. I'd thought monsters incapable of independent thought aside from their instincts, but I was wrong. Though it might have been the first thing on any monster's mind, in these putrid creatures I had sensed a will—and a desire to live. The zombified husks had wanted nothing more than to come back to life.

It was then that I learned how an opponent's blade can tell you things about them that they may not even realize themselves.

“Why do you cry, Kilika? Is it because the illusion of love and false happiness you enjoyed has been shattered?” I asked, pushing out of a fierce blade lock and retreating to a safe distance.

The force of my push sent Kilika flying, but she twisted her body midair and landed cleanly on her feet. She stared back at me with a twisted expression and lifeless azure eyes.

“Me, crying? Are you hallucinating, or are you just spewing whatever nonsense pops into your stupid brain? Look at my face! I'm smiling, don't you see?!”

Oh, is that what that creepy expression was supposed to be? Could've fooled me.

“So do you just hate your sister's guts or what? Did you get a kick out of seeing her constantly beating herself up over a misunderstanding that *you* perpetuated?”

“Hate her guts?” Kilika repeated, lowering her gaze to the floor.

The onlookers, having been freed from her spell, stopped trying to flee from the scene of our unsanctioned duel and listened intently to our conversation. Even many of those who'd already fled had sensed something big was afoot and were coming back. I stepped back and moved Amelia to a safer spot. Kilika was kind enough to stop her assault while I did this, but then she picked up right where we left off.

“Of *course* I hate her guts!” she screamed.

“But it's not because she's a Child of Blight, now, is it?” I asked, at which point she charged me with her sword.

But now they were just normal thrusts, as her fluctuating emotions had canceled out her elemental buff. I blocked each strike, careful not to let the follow-through of any of her thrusts get anywhere

close to Amelia. Seeing this, Kilika's eyes went hollower and more lifeless than before.

"Of course not, you imbecile. The blight is just an old wives' tale. Yes, they used to kill one of every pair of twins hundreds and hundreds of years ago, but the practice was abolished as harmful superstition by the time of our late grandfather—because the blight they were so afraid of never came, and it's hard enough for us elves to reproduce as it is. Having to give up even a single child was a significant blow to our already abysmal birth rate. No one seriously believes in the mark of the blight anymore—though that didn't stop my sister from developing a complex about it."

We continued trading blows as Kilika turned her gaze toward Amelia, lying unconscious on the ground. Even now, there wasn't even the tiniest flicker of light behind her gaze.

"Oh, yes. My sweet, beautiful sister. Adored by all for her striking hair and eyes not even the high elf nobility could hope to match. To think those gifts could have been mine. To think *I* could have been the eldest child, if I'd only made it out of the womb a few moments faster," she lamented, turning back toward me. An intense fire now burned in her eyes. "Not that you could ever understand, of course. To have a sister who would have been ostracized and killed just a few hundred years ago be blessed with a legendary class and become a source of jubilation and hope for the entire continent, while I, the younger sibling, was nothing but a lowly enchanter. My sister, the holy spirit medium, was treated like a messenger from the gods, and could do or have anything her little heart desired. Child of Blight? Don't make me laugh. That girl is a child of *light*. Even when I almost had her killed, it seems divine providence refused to let her die, as she survived the fall from that cliff and somehow washed ashore all the way over on the human continent where she just so happened to be rescued by a boy like you, the strongest bodyguard anyone could possibly ask for? Her luck defies probability. It is a bona fide miracle."

One by one, Kilika let loose all the negative emotions she'd bottled up over the years—her feelings of jealousy, of inferiority. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the king looking on in speechless surprise, unable to believe his ears.

"You could never understand what it's like to be me," Kilika continued. "Not you, and certainly not my sister! You've been loved and

acknowledged for your gifts your entire lives! You've never had to work hard for anything!"

At last, her indomitable iron facade crumbled. This girl, who'd presented herself as a confident and self-assured adult, was now nothing more than an inconsolable crying child.

"I was never anything more than an accessory to my sister. No one understands how hard I worked to earn the same respect. They always say, 'Well, of course you're talented. You *are* Amelia's sister, after all.' Half of them don't even remember my name. No matter how deeply I devote myself to the sword and try to hone my skills, it's always 'Wow, you're so noble for wanting to get stronger so you can defend your sister,' or 'Wow, you make it look so easy! Guess being naturally gifted runs in the family!' They always have to compare me to *her*!"

Step by cautious step, I moved closer to Kilika. Through her sobs, she was flailing her sword about with reckless abandon. Unable to block this flurry with my katana, I simply let the blows hit me, eliciting a wave of gasps from the peanut gallery.

"I don't exist just to be my sister's sidekick! Everything I do, I do for *me*, so that people will finally acknowledge *me* for my own merits! I had to work as hard as anyone else would to get to where I am! From the ground up! But no matter what I do, I'll always have to live in her shadow!"

Her gradually weakening slashes left shallow cuts all across my upper body, but with my superhuman stamina and defense, she could hardly even pierce the skin, much less the muscle underneath. If anything was taking damage, it was her sword, which soon snapped like a twig against my rock-hard muscles, leaving nothing but the hilt and handguard. Having finally disarmed her, I reached out and seized her by the hand. She let out a genuinely horrified shriek, which stung a bit. I knew all too well what it felt like to go unnoticed and unappreciated, and her skill with a sword was undeniable. If it weren't for my inhuman defense, she could have carved me to pieces just now. At last, Kilika released her grip on the hilt of her fractured rapier, and it fell from her hand to the ground.

"I...I... Everything I ever cared about, she took away from me. Even Liam, the one person who ever acknowledged my efforts... She stole him away and made him her fiancé," Kilika said, defeated. "So I leveled up my Mesmerize skill, determined to take back everything that

should have rightfully been mine. First, I took Liam. Then I used it on my clueless father to get him on my side and have him gather all the elves in one place under the pretext of a training exercise. There, I used Mesmerize on them all at once and betrayed my sister. I didn't really mean to kill her—I simply wanted her to suffer like I had suffered, to know what it felt like to have everything taken from you... But then she came back, and I decided I'd rather have her dead after all. I instructed my archers to rain arrows down upon her, but you thwarted me at every turn, even showing me up in a duel of swordsmanship—the one thing I was ever any good at.”

Kilika sank to the floor in defeat, and I sat down next to her. I ran my fingers through her hair the same way I'd always done with her sister. I was pretty sure Amelia wouldn't be angry with me for it. After all, this was the sister she'd told me all those fantastical stories about down in the labyrinth, and now that I'd heard Kilika's side of things, I thought I finally understood. I decided it was time I closed the curtain on this tragic tale born from a simple, heartbreaking misunderstanding.

“Hey, Kilika. I wanna tell you a story.”

“A...story? Now, of all times?”

“Yes. It's extremely important we do this right here and now,” I insisted, looking up at the darkening evening sky with a wistful smile. “Once upon a time, in the kingdom of the elves, there lived a pair of princesses—twin sisters born into the royal family.”

Kilika's eyes grew wide, immediately realizing what was up. Unsurprising, given that I was pretty bad at trying to disguise real life stories as allegories, but I needed to make sure she paid close attention. And the spectators too. I noticed Amelia was conscious, but as she remained lying down, I assumed she wanted me to handle this.

“The twin sisters looked very much alike, yet their hair and eye color couldn't have been more different,” I continued, trying my best to weave my words like a fairy tale.

The sisters' names were Amelia and Kilika. Amelia was the elder and Kilika the younger. They were both extremely beautiful, among the fairest elves in the history of high elf nobility, the most beautiful in a race known for its peerless beauty. Where the elder sister was a master of magic, the younger was a servant to the sword.

There was one other difference between the two of them, even

greater than their appearances—their respective classes. The older sister was a spirit medium, a divine class reserved only for those blessed by the Creator himself. She could make almost anything she wished for into a reality. Rather, it seemed the world itself heard her innermost thoughts and desires and adjusted itself accordingly. This happened with the eightieth-floor boss of the labyrinth, when, of all the many forms the shapeshifting cat could have taken, it chose to become a dragon, the very same creature Amelia had been hoping to see. She was also blessed with a near infinite supply of mana, and while not as physically adept as her sister, she could hold her own with a bow as well.

The younger sister, on the other hand, was a simple enchanter—not a rare or auspicious class by any means—and her preferred weapon, the sword, was practically heretical as far as her fellow elves were concerned. Yet at the time of their birth, the elves were a peace-loving race who cared little for meritocracy, so those who judged the twins based on the relative rarity of their respective classes were few and far between.

Then tragedy struck.

Kilika was still but a child at the time and thus had no memory of the night when their father cradled her in his arms as they fled the keep. But Amelia remembered everything. Even though she tried to forget, her World Eyes wouldn't let her, showing her the memory over and over in her dreams.

When the twins were about seven years of age, monsters flooded out from the Great Forest Labyrinth and ravaged the elven domain. The incident was caused by a blunder on the part of the younger sister, who'd gone to the labyrinth to hone her skills. Hoping to lure out some weak opponents to fight, she miscalculated and sprinkled a far greater quantity of monster bait at the entrance of the labyrinth than she should have.

In contrast to the physically resistant monsters of the Great Labyrinth of Kantinen, those in the elven labyrinth were extremely weak to physical attacks, so a sword wielder like Kilika typically had nothing to fear. The use of bait to lure out monsters was a practice that had been passed down by elven hunters since time immemorial as well. The only mistake the girl made was in the volume of bait she used—she sprinkled nearly ten times the usual amount.

Of course, the girl harbored no ill intent. She simply made a careless error in judgment and bit off more than she could chew. At the time, the deepest anyone had ever gone into the elven labyrinth was the seventy-third floor, but the bait she used drew out monsters from floors below even that, and not just by the dozens, but by the hundreds and thousands.

The king ordered all civilians to evacuate, then formed a makeshift militia to fight the beasts, but many elven lives were lost in the battles that ensued. In the midst of the chaos, his oldest daughter, who was supposed to be safely evacuated, used her legendary Spellcraft skill to create Gravity Magic, an ancient art thought lost to time, and made short work of the enemies despite their high magic resistance. Then, a few days later, she crafted Resurrection Magic to revive those who'd died in the battle. This brought the number of elven casualties down to zero, and the people revered the young girl, forever in her debt.

This caused her younger sister, who didn't remember the averted tragedy, to develop an inferiority complex, because the people didn't revere her the same way. As the centuries went by and the passage of time took its toll, the elves' lives returned to normal, and the entire incident was all but wiped from anyone's recollection. Or so one might have believed.

A few hundred years later, another incident occurred. A lone troubadour visited the elven domain, wishing to know what legends and folktales the elves had passed down through the years, hoping to convert them into song. This brought the monster incident back to the forefront of everyone's minds. The common folk remembered the younger sister was to blame.

The elven population was and always had been the smallest of the four races, so while they lacked the technology to monitor events from halfway across the world in real time—like we had back in my world—news spread through the small community almost as quickly. And as the rumors spread like wildfire, a faction of elves who didn't support the current royal family began using the story as a justification for their opposition. If left unchecked, the one truth the royal family most wished to have forgotten would soon leave them open to censure and reproach. It might even endanger the life of the younger sister who was responsible for the incident.

The king, who loved both his daughters very much, knew there was only one thing he could do. He would have to use his unique Extra Skill, Forgetting. But there was a catch—the skill only worked by removing all memory of a particular individual. This meant that, without telling either of his daughters, the king completely erased Kilika from the memories of every elf in the Sacred Forest. The only members of the royal family they now recognized were the king and Amelia.

With the younger sister's very existence having been purged from elven society, she soon found herself utterly ignored by her countrymen...or rather, treated as any stranger would be, and she was clueless as to why. Slowly, over time, the king reinstated the memory of her being the older princess's younger sister in the people's minds, but he was likely unaware of just how great a toll this took on his daughter's mental state.

So although the girl seemed on the surface to be living a peaceful life as she worked her way up the ranks of the Adventurers' Guild, by never telling the princess what had truly transpired, the king had crushed her heart and mind beyond repair.

When I finished recounting the tale, I let out a deep sigh. It was the truth—the whole truth. Amelia had told me all of this down in the labyrinth while Night was recovering from our battle and unable to move. She'd removed all the names from the story and told it as though it was a fable, but after arriving in the eleven domain and bearing witness to Kilika's mental state firsthand, I'd come to realize that it was all painfully, regrettably true.

"Why, Father? Why did you never tell me this?" Kilika whispered in disbelief. The sun had long since set, and now the king was sitting by his daughter's side looking up at the vast sea of stars adorning the night sky. Amelia had listened intently as I spoke, as had the other elves from their positions on the ground.

"The reason was twofold, my dear," responded the king. "First, because, even if I were to tell you, you would still have no personal recollection of the events. And the fact remains that the only thing you did wrong was miscalculate the amount of bait you needed. The responsibility for the incident falls on me for not keeping a closer eye on you. Second, because, although I believe you committed no crime, it

still directly resulted in many of our countrymen having to experience the pain of death, and I thought that knowledge would forever be a heavy burden on your kindhearted soul.”

I was certain the king had every intention of telling Kilika one day, but considering the average lifespan for high elves was practically limitless—so long as one was careful not to die in combat or of illness—Amelia and Kilika were still extremely young by elven standards. Perhaps he’d been planning to tell her on her one thousandth birthday or something. Who could say?

Kilika had other plans in mind, however, and she never revealed how she truly felt about the way people treated her until it was too late. She had her oblivious father gather up the troops and used Mesmerize on them all, the king included. Then there was nothing he could do to stop his daughter’s psychotic rampage, including when she drove Amelia from the elven domain, where she was swallowed up by a murky slime on the shores of Kantinen, which was what ultimately led to her meeting up with me.

“S-Sister... You knew of this all along?” asked Kilika.

“Yes... I’m so sorry, Kilika,” said Amelia, running her fingers through her sister’s hair the same way I always did to her.

Kilika didn’t seem to notice this. She simply stared off into space, her eyes wavering like a dying flame.

“Then it was all a misunderstanding on my part? I was simply frustrated over some perceived slight against me, and you never did anything to deserve it?”

“No, *I* did something to deserve it,” the king chimed in, wrapping Kilika up in his arms. “I could have told you this sooner, but I chose not to because I thought you were still too young to know. That was my mistake, and I am so very sorry for it, my dear.”

Kilika, having likely forgotten the warmth of her father’s embrace, broke down in tears.

“Oh, Father, what a terrible daughter I’ve been... I’ve done such horrible things to you, and to Sister, and to all of our people...” she sobbed.

“I forgive you, Kilika,” said Amelia with a smile. “Seeing you devote yourself so fervently to your training, from the early hours of the

morning each day until deep into the night, gave me the drive to work hard and improve myself as well. Even when the monsters came flooding out of the labyrinth, I was only able to muster my courage and wipe them out because I wanted to do whatever I could to measure up to you. You are and always have been the person I aspire to be, Kilika.”

Thank you, mouthed Kilika before the dam burst and the tears came gushing out.

“Sister, Father, Mr. Akira, my fellow countrymen...forgive me! I’m so...so sorry...”

The two sisters and their father cried as they came together in a familial embrace. Some of the elves in the audience sobbed right along with them. I decided to make myself scarce and climbed up a tree on the periphery of the plaza, lying down on one of its sturdy branches. I couldn’t bear to be around them any longer. It reminded me far too much of me, my mother, and Yui.

Yui and I were twins as well. I’d been born just before midnight on the cutoff day for school year eligibility while she was born only minutes after, so she was a grade behind me in school. Giving birth to two children at once had taken a massive toll on our already sickly mother, and our biological father had been forced to raise us virtually by himself.

I hadn’t realized it at the time, but now that I was older, I could see just how hard he’d worked for the three of us back then. He would wake up early and make all of us both breakfast and lunch, then wake us up and drop us off at preschool after breakfast before heading to his job. After a grueling day at work, he would come pick us up from daycare and take us home before cooking the whole family dinner. By the time he tucked us in and did all the dishes and laundry, it was well after midnight. And he probably didn’t get much sleep, since he had to deal with us when we woke in the middle of the night. Yet he kept up with the routine, raising me and Yui all the way until I was in fifth grade, while also taking care of Mom, and doing all the housework in addition to his day job. All without any help, and without ever uttering a complaint.

I couldn’t blame the man for up and disappearing on us one day. I’d been angry with him at first, of course, but more than anything, I was grateful to him for all his years of devoted service. While I was jealous of Amelia and Kilika in many respects, I could also sympathize

with them in a way. Their tragedy was likely a result of all parties involved bottling up their feelings and hoping the situation would sort itself out one day. If they had just come together as a family and talked it out at some point, this all could have been avoided. Maybe my biological father would still be around if we hadn't made him shoulder all those burdens by himself for so long.

I decided right then and there that I would do everything I could to track my father down once I made it back to Japan. If I found out he was living a happy and fulfilling life without us, I would make no attempt to interfere, but if I found that he was struggling or trapped in another unhealthy living situation, I would invite him to come back and live with us as a family again, if he so desired. Only this time, we would all pull our own weight. I knew my sister would be on board with this idea.

"Then that settles it. Yui, once I make it back home, you and I are gonna work together to rebuild our family. But before I can do that, I have a score to settle here. I need to avenge Commander Saran. And while they might be a bunch of bumbling buffoons, I should probably rescue my classmates while I'm at it too."

Guess my life in this world is only gonna get busier and busier from here on out.

That was my final thought before I fell asleep, lying beneath the stars.

Afterword

IF YOU'RE READING THIS MESSAGE, then thank you so very much for taking a chance on this book and following through to the very end. My name is Matsuri Akai, and I am the author of this story (which I still can't quite believe has been picked up for a proper publication). I hope my faithful readers who've been following Akira's journey since its inception as a web novel will enjoy this book just as much as those who are reading it for the first time. I've made quite a few changes and corrections for this new print version. Some of these changes to the in-universe lore—as well as to various explanations and backstories—may come as a surprise to some fans, but I feel they make the story less convoluted and more approachable than its previous incarnation. So to any of you rebellious troublemakers who decided to read this Afterword before the actual novel, I'm pleased to say you have plenty to look forward to in that regard.

I've been reading the afterwords to many of the novels I have lying around in the hopes they might give me some inspiration as to what to write for this section, and I'm amazed at how effortlessly hilarious the authors of all my favorite books can be when scribbling down their most candid thoughts. It's made me realize I'm nowhere near as funny as them, and I don't see that changing anytime soon, so please don't get your hopes up in that regard.

In fact, I've already run out of things to say, so I suppose I'll just move on to thanking the individuals who played an instrumental role in getting this book published and out into the world. First and foremost, I'd like to thank Y-sama, who picked out my story from amidst the bottomless sea of web novels and gave me a chance to publish it professionally, and who has been so considerate in planning around my schedule as a student, as well as S-sama, who so kindly came out to meet me and sort out the initial paperwork. They, along with everyone else at Overlap, have been nothing but supportive throughout the entire publishing process.

I must also express my deepest gratitude to Tozai-sama, whose beautiful illustrations have really helped bring this book and its characters to life. Your willingness to adapt to my extremely fussy

demands has resulted in some truly astounding character designs that look almost exactly the way I always envisioned them in my head. I can't thank you enough for your contributions.

I would also like to thank all of the many readers who've picked up this book and taken part in this journey along with me.

Finally, although I feel I'm still a bit young to get so embarrassingly sentimental, I would like to express how truly grateful I am to my family, who have always had my back in this endeavor and supported me in pursuing my dreams, both mentally and financially. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I hope that you will all look forward to seeing where Akira's travels lead him next, both in the web novel and in these new-and-improved print versions.



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